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TAQUISARA

F. MARION CRAWFORD

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The
Co.

TAQUISARA

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF "SARACINESCA," "PIETRO GHISLERI," "KATHARINE LAUDERDALE," "THE RALSTONS," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

LONDON: MACMILLAN & CO., LTD.

1896

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TAQUISARA.

CHAPTER I.

"WHERE shall I sign my name?"

Veronica Serra's thin, dark fingers rolled the old silver penholder nervously as she sat at one end of the long library table, looking up at the short, stout man who stood beside her.

"Here, if you please, Excellency," answered Lamberto Squarci, with an affable smile.

His fingers were dark, too, but not thin, and they were smooth and dingy and very pointed, a fact which the young princess noticed with dislike, as he indicated the spot on the broad sheet of rough, hand-made paper, where he wished her to sign. A thrill of repulsion that was strong enough to be painful ran through her, and she rolled the penholder still more quickly and nervously, so that she almost dropped it, and a little blot of ink fell upon the sheet before she had begun to write.

"Oh! It is of no importance!" said the Neapolitan notary, in a reassuring tone. "A little ink more or less!"

He had some pink blotting-paper ready, and was already applying a corner of it to the ink-spot, with the neat skill of a professional scribe.

"I will erase it when it is dry," he said. "You will not even see it. Now, if your Excellency will sign — that will make the will valid."

Three other persons stood around Donna Veronica as she set the point of her pen to the paper, and two of them watched the characters she traced, with eager, unwinking eyes. The third was a very insignificant personage just then, being but the notary's clerk; but his signature was needed as a witness to the will, and he patiently waited for his turn. The other two were husband and wife, Gregorio and Matilde, Count and Countess Macomer; and the countess was the young girl's aunt, being the only sister of Don Tommaso Serra, Prince of Acireale, Veronica's dead father. She looked on, with an eager, pleased expression, standing upright and bending her head in order to see the point of the pen as it moved over the rough paper. Her hands were folded before her, but the uppermost one twitched and moved once or twice, as though it would go out to get possession of the precious document which left her all the heiress's great possessions in case of Donna Veronica's death. It was a bit of paper well worth having.

The girl rose, slight and graceful, when she had written her name, and the finely chiselled lips had

an upward curve of young scorn, as she turned from the table, while the notary and his clerk proceeded to witness the will. Immediately, the countess smiled, very brightly, showing beautiful teeth between smooth red lips, and her strong arms went round her young niece. She was a woman at least forty years of age, but still handsome.

"I thank you with all my heart!" she cried. "It is a proof of affection which I shall never forget! You will live a hundred years — a thousand, if God will it! But the mere wish to leave me your fortune is a token of love and esteem which I shall know how to value."

Donna Veronica kissed her aunt's fresh cheek coldly, and drew back as soon as she could.

"I am glad that you are pleased," she answered in a cool and colourless voice.

She felt that she had said enough, and, so far as she expected any thanks, her aunt had said too much. She had made the will and had signed it, for the sake of peace, and she asked nothing but peace in return. Ever since she had left the convent in which she had been educated and had come to live with her aunt, the question of this will had arisen at least once every day, and she knew by heart every argument which had been invented to induce her to make it. The principal one had always been the same. She had been told that if, in the inscrutable ways of Providence, she should

chance to die young, unmarried and childless, the whole of the great Acireale property would go to relations whom she had never seen and of whom she scarcely knew the names. This, the Countess Macomer had insisted, would be a terrible misfortune, and as human life was uncertain, even when one was very young, it was the duty of Veronica to provide against it, by leaving everything to the one remaining member of the Serra family who, with herself, represented the direct line, who had taken a mother's place and duties in bringing up the orphan girl, and who had been ready to sacrifice every personal consideration for the sake of the child's welfare.

Veronica did not see clearly that the Countess Macomer had ever really sacrificed anything at all in the execution of her trust as guardian, any more than the count himself, who, with Cardinal Campodonico, was a joint trustee, had ever been put to any inconvenience, beyond that of being the uncle by marriage of one of the richest heiresses in Italy. It was natural that when she had signed the will at last, she should receive her aunt's effusive thanks rather coldly, and that she should show very little enthusiasm when her uncle kissed her forehead and expressed his appreciation of her loving intention. The plain truth was that if she had refused any longer to sign the will, the two would have made her life even more unbearable than it was already.

She knew that there was no reason why her life should be made hard to bear. She was not only rich, and a princess in her own right. She was young and, if not pretty, at least fairly well endowed with those gifts which attract and please, and bring their possessor the daily little satisfactions that make something very like happiness, before passion throws its load into the scales of life on the right side or the wrong. She knew that, at her age, she might have been married already, and she wondered that her aunt should not have proposed to marry her before now. Yet in this she was not displeased, for her best friend, Bianca Campodonico, had been married two years already to Corleone, of evil fame, and was desperately unhappy. Veronica dreaded a like fate, and was in no haste to find a husband. The countess told her always that she should be free to choose one for herself within reasonable limits of age, name, and fortune. Such an heiress, with such a fortune, said Matilde Macomer, could marry whom she pleased. But so far as Veronica had been allowed to see the world, the choice seemed anything but large.

The count and countess had always been very careful in the selection of their intimate associates — they could hardly be said to have any intimate friends. Since Veronica had come to them from the convent in Rome, where she had been educated

according to her dead father's desire, they had been doubly cautious and trebly particular as to the persons they chose to receive. Their responsibility, they said openly, was very great. The child's happiness was wholly in their hands. They would be held accountable if she should form an unfortunate attachment for some ineligible young man who might chance to dine at their table. The responsibility, they repeated with emphasis, was truly enormous. It was also an unfortunate fact that in their Neapolitan society there were many young men, princes and dukes by the score, who had nothing but their names and titles to recommend them, and who would have found it very hard to keep body and title together, so to say, if gambling had suddenly been abolished, or had gone out of fashion unexpectedly.

Then, too, the Macomer couple had always led a retired life and had kept aloof from the very gay portion of society. They lived well, according to their station, and so far as any one could see; but it had always been said that Gregorio Macomer was miserly. At the same time it suited his wife, for reasons of her own, not to be conspicuous in the world, and she encouraged him to lead a quiet existence, spending half the year in the country, and receiving very few people when in Naples during the winter and spring. Gregorio had one brother, Bosio, considerably younger than himself

and very different in character, who was not married and who lived at the Palazzo Macomer, on excellent terms both with Gregorio and the countess, as well as with Veronica herself. The young girl was inclined to like him, though she felt dimly that she could never understand him as she believed that she understood her aunt and uncle. He was, indeed, almost the only man, excepting her uncle, whom she could be said to know tolerably well. He was not present on that afternoon when she signed the will, but his absence did not surprise her, for he had always abstained from any remarks about her property or his brother's and sister-in-law's guardianship, in such a marked way as to make her understand that he really wished to know nothing about the management or disposal of her fortune.

She liked him for several reasons,—for his non-interference in discussions about her affairs, for a certain quiet consideration, just a shade more friendly than deference, which he showed for her slightest wishes, and chiefly, perhaps, for his conversation and perfectly even temper.

Her uncle Macomer was not always good-tempered and he was never considerate. He was a stiff man, of impenetrable face, much older than his wife, cold when he was pleased, and harsh as rough ice when he was annoyed; a tall, bony man, with flattened lips, from which the grey moustaches and the beard

were brushed smoothly away in all directions. He had very small eyes — a witty enemy of his said they were so small that one could not find them in his face, and those who knew him laughed at the jest, for they always seemed hard to find when one wished to meet them. His shoulders were unusually high and narrow, but he did not stoop. On the contrary, he habitually threw back his head, with a certain coldly aggressive stiffness, so that he easily looked above the person with whom he was talking. Though he had never been given to any sort of bodily exercise, his hands were naturally horny, and they were almost always cold. For the rest, he was careful of his appearance and scrupulous in matters of dress, like many of his fellow-countrymen. In his household he insisted upon a neatness as fastidious as his own, and nothing could have induced him to employ a Neapolitan servant. His family colours were green and black, and the green of his servants' liveries was of the very darkest that could be had.

He imposed his taste upon his household, and gave it a certain marked respectability which betrayed no information about his fortune. To all appearances he was not poor; but it would have been impossible to say with certainty whether he were rich or only in moderate circumstances. He was undoubtedly more careful than ninety-nine out of a hundred of his fellow-citizens, in getting

the value of what he spent, to the uttermost splitting of farthings; and when he spoke of money there was a certain cruel hardening of the hard lines in his face, which Veronica never failed to notice with dislike. She wondered how her aunt could have led an apparently tranquil life with such a man during more than twenty years.

Doubtless, she thought, Bosio's presence acted as a palliative in the somewhat grim atmosphere of the Palazzo Macomer. He was utterly different from his brother. In the first place, he was gentle and kind in speech and manner, though apparently rather sad than gay. He was different in face, in figure, in voice, in carriage — having quiet brown eyes, and brown hair only streaked with grey, with a full, silky beard; a clear pale complexion; in frame shorter than Gregorio, with smaller bones, slightly inclined to stoutness, but rather graceful than stiff; small feet and well-shaped hands of pleasant texture; a clear, low voice that never jarred upon the ear, and a kindly, half-sad laugh in which there was a singular refinement, of the sort which shows itself more in laughter than in speech. Laughter is, indeed, a terrible betrayer of the character, and a surer guide in judgment than most people know. For men learn to use their voices skilfully and to govern their tones as well as their words; but, beyond not laughing too loud for ordinary decency of behaviour, there are few

people who care, or realize, how they laugh; and those who do, and who, being aware that there is room for improvement, endeavour to improve, very generally produce either a semi-musical noise, which is false and affected, or a perfectly inane cachinnation which has nothing human in it at all.

Bosio Macomer was a refined man, not only by education and outward contact with the refinements he sought in others, but within himself and by predisposition of nature. He read much, and found beauties in books which his friends thought dull, but which appealed tenderly to his innate love of tenderness. He had probably lost many illusions, but the sweetest of them all was still fresh in him, for he loved nature unaffectedly. In an unobtrusive way he was something of an artist, and was fond of going out by himself, when in the country, to sketch and dream all day. Veronica did not understand how with such tastes he could bear the life in the Palazzo Macomer, for months at a time. He was free to go and come as he pleased, and since he preferred the country, she wondered why he did not live out of town altogether. His existence was the more incomprehensible to her, as he rarely lost an opportunity of finding fault with Naples as a city and with the Neapolitans as human beings. Sometimes he did not leave the house for many days, as he frankly admitted, preferring the little apartment in the upper story of the house,

where he lived independently, with one old servant, amongst his books and his pictures, appearing downstairs only at dinner, and not always then. His place was always ready for him, but no one ever remarked his absence, nor inquired where he might be when he chose to stay away.

He was on excellent terms with every one. The servants adored him, while they feared his brother and disliked the countess; when he appeared he never failed to kiss the countess's hand, and to exchange a friendly word or two with Gregorio; but as for the latter, Bosio made no secret of the fact that he preferred the society of the ladies of the household to that of the count, with whom he had little in common. He certainly admired his sister-in-law, and more than once frankly confessed to Veronica that in his opinion Matilde Macomer was still the most beautiful woman in the world. Yet Veronica had observed that he was critical of looks in other women, and she thought his criticisms generally just and in good taste. For her part, however, if he chose to consider her middle-aged aunt lovely, Veronica would not contradict him, for she was cautious in a certain degree, and in spite of herself she distrusted her surroundings.

There were times when the Countess Macomer inspired her with confidence. Those very beautiful dark eyes of hers had but one defect, namely, that they were quite too near together; but they

were still the best features in the elder woman's face, and when Veronica looked at them from such an angle as not to notice their relative position, she almost believed that she could trust them. But she never liked the smooth red lips, nor the over-pointed nose, which had something of the falcon's keenness without its nobility. The thick and waving brown hair grew almost too low on the white forehead, and, whether by art or nature, the eyebrows were too broad and too dark for the face, though they were so well placed as to greatly improve the defect of the close-set eyes. There was a marvellous genuine freshness of colour in the clear complexion, and the woman carried her head well upon a really magnificent neck. She was strong and vital and healthy, and her personality was as distinctly dominating as her physical self. Yet she was generally very careful not to displease her husband, even when he was capricious, and Veronica was sometimes surprised by the apparent weakness with which she yielded to him in matters about which she had as good a right as he to an opinion and a decision. The girl supposed that her aunt was not so strong as she seemed to be, when actually brought face to face with the rough ice of Gregorio Macomer's character.

Veronica made her observations discreetly and kept them to herself, as was not only becoming but wise. At first the change from the semi-cloistered

existence of the convent in Rome to the life at the Palazzo Macomer had dazzled the girl and had confused her ideas. But with the natural desire of the very young to seem experienced, she had begun by manifesting no surprise at anything she saw; and she had soon discovered that, although she was supposed to be living in the society of the most idle and pleasure-loving city in the world, her surroundings were in reality neither gay nor dazzling, but decidedly monotonous and dull. She had dim, childish memories of magnificent things in her father's house, though the main impression was that of his death, following closely, as she had been told, upon her mother's. Of the latter, she could remember nothing. In dreams she saw beautiful things, and brilliant light and splendid pictures and enchanted gardens, and when she awoke she felt that the dreams had been recollections of what she had seen, and of what still belonged to her. But she sought the reality in vain. The grand old palace in the Toledo was hers, she was told, but it was let for a term of years to the municipality and was filled with public offices; the marble staircases were black and dingy with the passing of many feet that tracked in the mud in winter and the filthy dust of Naples in summer. Dark, poor faces and ill-clad forms moved through the halls, and horrible voices echoed perpetually in the corridors, where those who waited discussed

taxes, and wrangled, and cursed those in power, and cheated one another, and picked a pocket now and then, and spat upon the marble pavement whereon royal and lordly feet had so often trod in days gone by. It had all become a great nest of dirt and stealing and busy chicanery, where dingy, hawk-eyed men with sodden white faces and disgusting hands lay in wait for the unwary who had business with the city government, to rob them on pretence of facilitating their affairs, to cringe for a little coin flung them in scorn sometimes by one who had grown rich in greater robbery than they could practise — sometimes, too, springing aside to escape a kick or a blow as ill-tempered success went swinging by, high-handed and vulgarly cruel, a few degrees less filthy and ten thousand times more repulsive.

Once, Veronica had insisted upon going through the palace. She would never enter it again, and after that day, when she passed it, she turned her face from it and looked away. Vaguely, she wondered whether they were not deceiving her and whether it were really the home she dimly remembered. There had been splendid things in it, then — she would not ask what had become of them, but without asking, she was told that they had been wisely disposed of, and that instead of paying people for keeping an uninhabited palace in order, she was receiving an enormous rent for it from the city.

Then she had wished to see the lovely villa that came back in the pictures of her dreams, and she had been driven out into the country according to her desire. From a distance, as the carriage approached it, she recognized the lordly poplars, and far at the end of the avenue the elaborately stuccoed front and cornices of the old-fashioned "barocco" building. But the gardens were gone. Files of neatly trimmed vines, trained upon poles stuck in deep furrows, stretched away from the avenue on either side. The flower garden was a vegetable garden now, and the artichokes and the cabbages and the broccoli were planted with mathematical regularity up to the very walls. There were hens and chickens on the steps and running in and out of the open door, and from a near sty the grunt of many pigs reached her ears. A pale, earthy-skinned peasant, scantily clad in dusty canvas, grinned sadly and kissed the hem of her skirt, calling her 'Excellency' and beginning at once to beg for reduction of rent. A field-worn woman, filthy and dishevelled, drove back half a dozen nearly naked children whose little legs were crusted with dry mud, and whose faces had not been washed for a long time.

And within, there was no furniture. In the rooms upstairs were stores of grain and potatoes, and red peppers and grapes hanging on strings. The cracked mirrors, built into the gilded stucco,

were coated with heavy unctuous dust, and the fine old painted tiles on the floor were loose and broken in places. In the ceiling certain pink and well-fed cherubs still supported unnatural thunder-clouds through which Juno forever drove her gold-wheeled car and team of patient peacocks, smiling high and goddess-like at the squalor beneath. Still Diana bent over Endymion cruelly foreshortened in his sleep, beyond the possibility of a waking return to human proportions. Mars frowned, Jove threatened, Venus rose glowing from the sea; and below, the unctuous black dust settled and thickened on everything except the cracked floors piled with maize and beans and lupins, and rubbed bright between the heaps by the peasants' naked feet.

Veronica turned her back upon the villa, as she had turned from the great palace in the Toledo. They whispered to her that the peasant's rent must not be reduced, for he was well able to pay, and they pointed to the closely planted vines and vegetables and olives that stretched far away to right and left, where she remembered in her dreams of far childhood that there had been lawns and walks and flowers. The man, she was told, was not the only peasant on the place. There were other houses now, and huts that could shelter a family, and there was land, land, always more land, as far as she could see, all as closely and neatly

and regularly planted with vegetables and grain, vines and olives; and it was all hers, and yielded enormous rents which were wisely invested. She was very rich indeed, but to her it all seemed horribly sordid and grinding and mean — and the peasants looked prematurely old, labour-worn, filthy, wretchedly poor. If she had even had any satisfaction from so much wealth, it might have seemed different. She said so, in her heart. She was accustomed to tell her confessor that she was proud and uncharitable and unfeeling — not finding any real misdeeds to confess. She was willing to believe that she was all that and much more. If she had been living in the whirling, golden pleasure-storm of an utterly thoughtless world, she believed herself bad enough to have shut her memory's eyes to the haggard peasant-mother of the dirty half-clad children — to all the hundreds of them who doubtless lived just like the one she had seen, all upon her lands; she could have forgotten the busy-thieving, sodden-faced crowd that thronged the chambers wherein her fathers had been born and had feasted kings and had died — the very room where her own father had lain dead. She could have shut it all out, she thought, if she had held in her hands the gold that all this brought, to scatter it at her will; for she was sure that she had not a better heart than other girls of her age. But she had never seen it. The reality of her own

life was too weak and colourless, by contrast, to make the name of fortune an excuse for the sordid facts of meanness. There was no splendour about her, no wild gaiety, none of the glorious extravagance of conscious young wealth, and there was very little amusement to divert her thoughts. The people she would have liked to know were kept at a distance from her. She was advised not to buy the things which attracted her eyes, and was told that they were not so good as they looked, and that on the whole it was better to keep money than to spend it — but that, of course, she might do as she pleased, and that when she wanted money her uncle Macomer would give it to her.

It all passed through his hands, and he managed everything, with the assistance of Lamberto Squarci the notary and of other men of business — mostly shabby-looking men in black, with spectacles and unhealthy complexions, who came and went in the morning when old Macomer was in his study attending to affairs. Veronica knew none but Squarci by name, and never spoke with any of them. There seemed to be no reason why she should.

The count had told her that when she wished it, he was ready to render an account of the estates and would be happy to explain everything to her at length. She understood nothing of business and was content to accept the roughest statement as he

chose to give it to her. She was far too young to distrust the man whom she had been taught to respect as her guardian and as a person of scrupulous honesty. She was completely in his power, and she was accustomed to ask him for any little sums she needed. It never really struck her that he might misuse the authority she indifferently left in his hands.

It was her aunt who had induced her to make the will, and for whose conduct she felt a sort of undefined resentment and contempt. Considering, she thought, how improbable it was that she herself should die before Matilde Macomer, the latter had shown an absurd anxiety about the disposal of the fortune. If Veronica had yielded the point, she had done so in order to get rid of an importunity which wearied her perpetually. She was to marry, of course, in due time. God would give her children, and they would inherit her wealth. It was really ridiculous of her aunt to be so anxious lest it should all go to those distant relations in Sicily and Spain. Nevertheless, in order to have peace, she signed the will, and her aunt thanked her effusively, and old Macomer's flat lips touched her forehead while he spoke a few words of gratified approval.

In the evening she told Bosio, the count's brother, of what she had done. His gentle eyes looked at her thoughtfully for a few seconds, and

he did not smile, nor did he make any observation.

A few minutes later he was talking of a picture he had seen for sale — a mere sketch, but by Ribera, called the Spagnoletto. She made up her mind to buy it for him as a surprise, for it pleased her to give him pleasure.

But when she was alone in her room that night she recalled Bosio's expression when she had told him about the will. She was sure that he was not pleased, and she wondered why he had not at least said something in reply — something quite indifferent perhaps, but yet something, instead of looking at her in total silence, just for those few seconds. After all, she was really more intimate with him than with her aunt and uncle, and liked him better than either of them, so that she had a right to expect that he should have answered with something more than silence when she told him of such a matter.

She sat a long time in a deep chair near her toilet table, thinking about her own life, in the great dim room which half a dozen candles barely lighted; and perhaps it was the first time that she had really asked herself how long her present mode of existence was to continue, how long she was to lie half-hidden, as it were, in the sombrely respectable dimness of the Macomer establishment, how long she was to remain unmarried. Knowing the cus-

toms of her own people in regard to marriage, as she did, it was certainly strange that she should not have heard of any offer made to her uncle and aunt for her hand. Surely the mothers of marriageable sons knew of her existence, of her fortune, of the titles she held in her own right and could confer upon her husband and leave to her children. It was not natural that no one should wish to marry her, that no mother should desire such an heiress for her son.

With the distrustful introspection of maiden youth, she suddenly asked herself whether by any possibility she were different from other girls and whether she had not some strange defect, physical or mental, of which the existence had been most carefully concealed from her all her life. In the quick impulse she rose and brought all the burning candles to the toilet table, and lighted others, and stood before the mirror, in the yellow light, gazing most critically at her own reflexion. She looked long and earnestly and quite without vanity. She told herself, cataloguing her looks, that her hair was neither black nor brown, but that it was very thick and long and waved naturally; that her eyes were very dark, with queer little angles just above the lids, under the prominent brows; that her nose, seen in full face, looked very straight and rather small, though she had been told by the girls in the convent that it was aquiline and pointed;

that her cheeks were thin and almost colourless; that her chin was round and smooth and prominent, her lips rather dark than red, and modelled in a high curve; that her ears were very small — she threw back the heavy hair to see them better, turning her face sideways to the glass; that her throat was over-slender, and her neck and arms far too thin for beauty, but with a young leanness which might improve with time, though nothing could ever make them white. She was dark, on the whole. She was willing to admit that she was sallow, that her eyes had a rather sad look in them, and even that one was almost imperceptibly larger than the other, though the difference was so small that she had never noticed it before, and it might be due to the uncertain light of the candles in the dim room. But most assuredly there was no physical defect to be seen. She was not beautiful like poor Bianca Corleone; but she was far from ugly — that was certain.

And in mind — she laughed as she looked at herself in the glass. Bosio Macomer told her that she was clever, and he certainly knew. But her own expression pleased her when she laughed, and she laughed again with pleasure, and watched herself in a sort of girlish and innocent satisfaction. Then her eyes met their own reflexion, and she grew suddenly grave again, and something in them told her that they were not laughing with her lips, and might not often look upon things mirthful.

But she was not stupid, and she was not ugly. She had assured herself of that. The worst that could be said was that she was a very thin girl and that her complexion was not brilliant, though it was healthy enough, and clear. No — there was certainly no reason why her aunt should not have received offers of marriage for her, and many people would have thought it strange that she should be still unmarried — with her looks, her name, and that great fortune of which Gregorio Macomer was taking such good care.

CHAPTER II.

On that same night, when Veronica had gone to her room, Bosio Macomer remained alone with the countess in the small drawing-room in which the family generally spent the evening. Gregorio was presumably in his study, busy with his perpetual accounts or otherwise occupied. He very often spent the hours between dinner and bedtime by himself, leaving his brother to keep his wife company if Veronica chose to retire early.

The room was small and the first impression of colour which it gave was that of a strong, deep yellow. There was yellow damask on the walls, the curtains were of an old sort of silk material in stripes of yellow and chocolate, and most of the furniture was covered with yellow satin. The whole was in the style of the early part of this century, modified by the bad taste of the Second Empire, with much gilded carving about the doors and the corners of the big panels in which the damask was stretched, while the low, vaulted ceiling was a mass of gilt stucco, modelled in heavy acanthus leaves and arabesques, from the centre of which hung a chandelier of white Venetian glass. There were no pictures on the walls, and

there were no flowers nor plants in pots, to relieve the strong colour which filled the eye. Nevertheless the room had the air of being inhabited, and was less glaring and stiff and old-fashioned than it might seem from this description. There were a good many books on the tables, chiefly French novels, as yellow as the hangings; and there were writing materials and a couple of newspapers and two or three open notes. A small wood fire burned in a deep, low fireplace adorned with marble and gilt brass.

Matilde Macomer sat, leaning back, upon a little sofa which stood across a corner of the room far from the fire. One hand lay idly in her lap, the other, as she stretched out her arm, lay upon the back of the sofa, and her head with its thick, brown hair was bent down. She had fixed her eyes upon a point of the carpet and had not moved from her position for a long time. The folds of her black gown made graceful lines from her knees to her feet, and her imposing figure was thrown into strong relief against the yellow background as she leaned to the corner, one foot just touching the floor.

Bosio sat at a distance from her, on a low chair, his elbows on his knees, staring at the fire. Neither had spoken for several minutes. Matilde broke the silence first, her eyes still fixed on the carpet.

"You must marry Veronica," she said slowly; "nothing else can save us."

It was clear that the idea was not new to Bosio, for he showed no surprise. But he turned deliberately and looked at the countess before he answered her. There were unusual lines in his quiet face — lines of great distress and perplexity.

"It is a crime," he said in a low voice.

Matilda raised her eyes, with an almost imperceptible movement of the shoulders.

"Murder is a crime," she answered simply. Then Bosio started violently and turned very white, almost rising from his seat.

"Murder?" he cried; "what do you mean?"

Matilde's smooth red lips smiled.

"I merely mentioned it as an instance of a crime," she said, without any change of tone. "You said it would be a crime for you to marry Veronica. It did not strike me that it could be called by that name. Crimes are murder, stealing, forgery — such things. Who would say that it was criminal for Bosio Macomer to marry Veronica Serra? There is no reason against it. I daresay that many people wonder why you have not married her already, and that many others suppose that you will before long. You are young, you have never been married, you have a very good name and a small fortune of your own."

"Take it, then!" exclaimed Bosio, impulsively.

"You shall have it all to-morrow — everything I possess. God knows, I am ready to give you all I have. Take it. I can live somehow. What do I care? I have given you my life — what is a little money? But do not ask me to marry her, your niece, here, under your very roof. I am not a saint, but I cannot do that!"

"No," answered the countess, "we are not saints, you and I, it is true. For my part, I make no pretences. But the trouble is desperate, Bosio. I do not know what to do. It is desperate!" she repeated with sudden energy. "Desperate, I tell you!"

"I suppose that all I have would be of no use, then?" asked Bosio, disheartened.

"It would pay the interest for a few months longer. That would be all. Then we should be where we are now, or shall be in three weeks."

"Throw yourself upon her mercy. Ask her to forgive you and to lend you money," suggested Bosio. "She is kind — she will do it, when she knows the truth."

"I had thought of that," answered Matilde. "But, in the first place, you do not know her. Secondly, you forget Cardinal Campodonico."

"Since he has left the management of her fortune in Gregorio's hands, he will not begin to ask questions at this point. Besides, the guardianship is at an end —"

"The estate has not been made over. He will insist upon seeing the accounts — that is no matter, for they will bear his inspection well enough. Squarci is clever! But Veronica sees him. She would tell him of our trouble, if we went to her. If not, she would certainly tell Bianca Corleone, who is his niece. If he suspected anything, let alone knowing the truth, that would be the end of everything. It would be better for us to escape before the crash — if we could. It comes to that — unless you will help us."

"By marrying Veronica?" asked Bosio, with a bitterness not natural to him.

"I see no other way. The cardinal could see the accounts. You could be married, and the fortune could be made over to you. She would never know, nor ask questions. You could set our affairs straight, and still be the richest man in Naples or Sicily. It would all be over. It would be peace — at last, at last!" she repeated, with a sudden change of tone that ended in a deep-drawn sigh of anticipated relief. "You do not know half there is to tell," she continued, speaking rapidly after a moment's pause. "We are ruined, and worse than ruined. We have been, for years. Gregorio got himself into that horrible speculation years and years ago, though I knew nothing about it. While Veronica was a minor, he helped himself, as he could — with her money. It was easy, for

he controlled everything. But now he can do nothing without her signature. Squarci said so last week. He cannot sell a bit of land, a stick of timber, anything, without her name. And we are ruined, Bosio. This house is mortgaged, and the mortgage expires on the first of January, in three weeks. We have nothing left — nothing but the hope of Veronica's charity — or the hope that you will marry her and save us from starvation and disgrace. I got her to sign the will. There was — "

The countess checked herself and stopped short, turning an emerald ring which she wore. She was pale.

"There was what?" asked Bosio, in an unsteady tone.

"There was just the bare possibility that she might die before January," said Matilde, almost in a whisper. "People die young sometimes, you know — very young. It pleases Providence to do strange things. Of course it would be most dreadful, if she were to die, would it not? It would be lonely in the house, without her. It seems to me that I should see her at night, in the dark corners, when I should be alone. Ugh!"

Matilde Macomer shivered suddenly, and then stared at Bosio with frightened eyes. He glanced at her nervously.

"I am afraid of you," he said.

"Of me?" Her presence of mind returned. "What an idea! just because I suggested that poor little Veronica might catch a cold or a fever in this horrible weather and might die of the one or the other? And just because I am fond of her, and said that I should be afraid of seeing her in the dark! Heaven give her a hundred years of life! Why should we talk of such sad things?"

"It is certainly not I who wish to talk of them, or think of them," answered Bosio, thoughtfully, and turning once more to the fire. "You are overwrought, Matilde — you are unhappy, afraid of the future — what shall I say? Sometimes you speak in a strange way."

"Is it any wonder? The case is desperate, and I am desperate, too — "

"Do not say it — "

"Then say that you will marry Veronica, and save us all, and bring peace into the house — for my sake, Bosio — for me!"

She leaned forward, and her hands met upon her knee in something like a gesture of supplication, while she sought his eyes.

"For your sake," repeated Bosio, dreamily. "For your sake? But you ask the impossible, Matilde. Besides, she would not marry me. She would laugh at the idea. And then — for you and me — it is horrible! You have no right to ask it."

"No right? Ah, Bosio! Have I not the right to ask anything of you, after all these years?"

"Anything — but not that! Your niece — under your roof! No — no — no! I cannot, even if she would consent."

"Not even — " Matilda's splendid eyes, so cruelly close together, fastened themselves upon the weak man's face, and she frowned.

"Not even if you thought it would be much better for her?" she asked very slowly, completing the sentence.

Again he started and shrank from her.

"Just God!" he exclaimed under his breath. "That a woman should have such thoughts!" Then he turned upon her with an instinctive revival of manhood and honour. "You shall not hurt her!" he cried, as fiercely as his voice could speak. "You shall not hurt a hair of her head, not even to save yourself! I will warn her — I will have her protected — I will tell everything! What is my life worth?"

"You would merely be told that you were mad, and we should have you taken out to the asylum at Aversa — as mad as I am, or soon shall be, if this goes on! You are mad to believe that I could do such things — I, a woman! And yet, I know I say words that have no reason in them! And I think crimes — horrible crimes, when I am alone — and I can tell no one but you. Have pity on me, Bosio! I was not always what I am now — "

She spoke incoherently, and her steadiness broke down all at once, for she had been living long under a fearful strain of terror and anxiety. The consciousness that she could say with safety whatever came first to her lips helped to weaken her. She half expected that Bosio would rise, and come to her and comfort her, perhaps, as she hid her face in her hands, shivering in fear of herself and shaking a little with the convulsive sob that was so near.

But Bosio did not move from his seat. He sat quite still, staring at the fire. He was not a physical coward, but, morally speaking, he was terrified and stunned by what he had understood her to say. Probably no man of any great strength of character, however bad, could have lived the life he had led in that house for many years, dominated by such a woman as Matilde Macomer. And now his weakness showed itself, to himself and to her, in what he felt, and in what he did, respectively. A strong man, having once felt that revival of manly instinct, would have turned upon her and terrified her and mastered her; and, within himself, his heart might have broken because he had ever loved such a woman. But Bosio sat still in his seat and said nothing more, though his brow was moist with a creeping, painful, trembling emotion that twisted his heart and tore his delicate nerves. He felt that his hands were very

cold, but that he could not speak. She dominated him still, and he was ashamed of the weakness, and of his own desire to go and comfort her and forget the things she had said.

If he had spoken to her, she would have burst into tears; but his silence betrayed that he had no strength, and she suddenly felt that she was strong again, and that there was hope, and that he might marry Veronica, after all. A woman rarely breaks down to very tears before a man weaker than herself, though she may be near it.

"You must marry her," said Matilde, with returning steadiness. "You owe it to your brother and to me. Should I say, 'to me,' first? It is to save us from disgrace — from being prosecuted as well as ruined, from being dragged into court to answer for having wilfully defrauded — that is the word they would use! — for having wilfully defrauded Veronica Serra of a great deal of money, when we were her guardians and responsible for everything she had. My hands are clean of that — your brother did it without my knowledge. But no judge living would believe that I, being a guardian with my husband, could be so wholly ignorant of his affairs. There are severe penalties for such things, Bosio — I believe that we should both be sent to penal servitude; for no power on earth could save us from a conviction, any more than anything but Veronica's money can save us from ruin now.

Gregorio has taken much, but it has been nothing compared with the whole fortune. If you marry her, she will never know — no one will know — no one will ever guess. As her husband you will have control of everything, and no one then will blame you for taking a hundredth part of your wife's money to save your brother. You will have the right to do it. Your hands will be clean, too, as they are to-day. What is the crime? What is the difficulty? What is the objection? And on the other side there is ruin, a public trial, a conviction and penal servitude for your own brother, Gregorio, Count Macomer, and Matilde Serra, his wife."

"My God! What a choice!" exclaimed Bosio, pressing both his cold hands to his wet forehead.

"There is no choice!" answered the woman, with low, quick emphasis. "Your mind is made up, and we will announce the engagement at once. I do not care what objection Veronica makes. She likes you, she is half in love with you — what other man does she know? And if she did — she would not repent of marrying you rather than any one else. You will make her happy — as for me, I shall at least not die a disgraced woman. You talk of choice! Mine would be between a few drops of morphia and the galleys, — a thousand times more desperate than yours, it seems to me!"

Her large eyes flashed with the furious determination to make him do what she desired. His hands had fallen from his face, and he was looking at her almost quietly, not yielding so much as she thought, but at least listening gravely instead of telling her that she asked the impossible.

The door opened discreetly, and a servant appeared upon the threshold.

"The Signor Duca della Spina begs your Excellency to receive him for a moment, if it is not too late."

"Certainly," answered the countess, instantly, and with perfect self-control.

The servant closed the door and went back to deliver the short message. Matilde threw the folds of her black gown away from her feet, so that she might rise to meet the visitor, who was an old man and a person of importance. She looked keenly at Bosio.

"Do not go away," she said quickly, in a low voice. "Your forehead is wet — dry it — compose yourself — be natural!"

Before Bosio had returned his handkerchief to his pocket the door opened again, and a tall old man entered with a stooping gait. He had weak and inquiring eyes that looked about the room as he walked. His head was bald, and shone like a skull in the yellow reflexion from the damask hangings. His gait was not firm, and as he passed Bosio

in order to reach the countess, he had an uncertain movement of head and hand, as though he were inclined to speak to him first. Matilde had risen, however, and had moved a step forward to meet the visitor, speaking at the same time, as though to direct him to herself, with the somewhat maternal air which even young women sometimes assume in greeting old men.

The Duca della Spina smiled rather feebly as he took the outstretched hand, and slowly sat down upon the sofa beside Matilde.

"I feared it might be too late," he began, and his watery blue eyes sought her face anxiously. "But my son insisted that I should come this evening, when he found that I had not been able to see you this afternoon."

"How is he?" asked the countess, suddenly assuming an expression of great concern.

"Eh! How he is! He is — so," answered the Duca, with a gesture which meant uncertainty. "Signora Contessa," he added, "he is not well at all. It is natural with the young. It is passion. What else can I tell you? He is impatient. His nerves shake him, and he does not eat. Morning and evening he asks, 'Father, what will it be?' So, to content him, I have come to disturb you."

"Not in the least, dear Duca!"

The door opened again, and Gregorio Macomer entered the room, having been informed of the pres-

ence of a visitor. The Duca looked up, and his head shook involuntarily, as he at once began the slow process of getting upon his legs. But Macomer was already pressing him into his seat again, holding the old hand in both of his with an appearance of much cordiality.

"I hope that Gianluca is no worse?" he said, with an interrogation that expressed friendly interest.

"Better he is not," answered the Duca, sadly. "What would you? It is passion. That is why I have come at this hour, and I have made my excuses to the Signora Contessa for disturbing her."

"Excuses?" cried Gregorio, promptly. "We are delighted to see you, dear friend!"

But as he spoke he turned a look of inquiry upon his wife, and she answered by a scarcely perceptible sign of negation.

They had been taken by surprise, for they had not expected the Duca's visit. Not heeding them, his heart full of his son, the old man continued to speak, in short, almost tremulous sentences.

"It is certain that Gianluca is very ill," he said. "Taquisara has been with him to-day, and Pietro Ghisleri — but Taquisara is his best friend. You know Taquisara, do you not?"

"A Sicilian?" asked the countess, encouraging the old man to go on.

"Yes," said Macomer, answering for the Duca, for he was proud of his genealogical knowledge.

"The only son of the old Baron of Guardia. But every one calls him Taquisara, though his father is dead. There is a story which says that they are descended from Tancred."

"It may be," said the old Duca. "There are so many legends — but he is Gianluca's best friend, and he comes to see him every day. The boy is ill — very ill." He shook his head, and bent it almost to his breast. "He wastes away, and I do not know what to do for him."

The Count and Countess Macomer also shook their heads gravely, but said nothing. Bosio, seated at a little distance, looked on, his brain still disturbed by what had gone before, and wondering at Matilde's power of seeming at her ease in such a desperate situation; wondering, too, at his brother's hard, cold face — the mask that had so well hidden the passion of the gambler, and perhaps many other passions as well, of which even Bosio knew nothing, nor cared to know anything, having secrets of his own to keep.

All at once, and without warning, after the short pause, the old man broke out in tremulous entreaty.

"Oh! my friends!" he cried. "Do not say no! I shall not have the courage to take such a message to my poor son! Eh, they say that nowadays old-fashioned love is not to be found. But look at Gianluca — he consumes himself, he wastes away before my eyes, and one day follows another, and I

can do nothing. You do not believe? Go and see! One day follows another — he is always in his room, consuming himself for love! He is pale — paler than a sheet. He does not eat, he does not drink, he does not smoke — he, who smoked thirty cigarettes a day! As for the theatre, or going out, he will not hear of it. He says, 'I will not see her, for if she will not have me, it is better to die quickly.' A father's heart, dear Macomer — think of what I suffer, and have compassion! He is my only one — such a beautiful boy, and so young — "

"We are sorry," said Matilde, with firm-voiced sympathy that was already a refusal.

"You will not!" cried the old man, shakily, in his distress. "Say you will not — but not that you are sorry! And Heaven knows it is not for Donna Veronica's money! The contract shall be as you please — we do not need — "

"Who has spoken of money?" The countess's tone expressed grave indifference to such a trifle. "Dear Duca, do not be distressed. We cannot help it. We cannot dictate to Providence. Had circumstances been different, what better match could we have found for her than your dear son? But I told you that the girl's inclinations must be consulted, and that we had little hope of satisfying you. And now — " She looked earnestly at her husband, as though to secure his consent beforehand — "and now it has turned out as we foresaw.

Courage, dear Duca! Your son is young. He has seen Veronica but a few times, and they have certainly never been alone together — what can it really be, such love-passion as that? Veronica has made her choice."

Not a muscle of Macomer's hard face moved. He knew that if his wife had a surprise for him on the spur of the moment, it must be for their joint interest. But the Duca della Spina's jaw dropped, and his hands shook.

"Yes," continued the countess, calmly, "Veronica has made her choice. It is hard for us to tell you, knowing how you feel for your son. Veronica is engaged to be married to Bosio, here."

Bosio started violently, for he was a very nervously organized man; but his brother's face did not change, though the small eyes suddenly flashed into sight brightly from beneath the drooping, concealing lids. A dead silence followed, which lasted several seconds. Matilde had laid her hand upon the Duca's arm, as though to give him courage, and she felt it tremble under her touch, for he loved his son very dearly.

"You might have written me this news," he said at last, in a low voice and with a dazed look. "You might — you might have spared me — oh, my son! My poor Gianluca!" His voice broke, and the weak, sincere tears broke from the watery eyes and trickled down the wasted cheeks piteously,

while his head turned slowly from side to side in sorrowfully hopeless regret.

"It has only been decided this evening," said Matilde. "We should have written to you in the morning."

"Of course," echoed her husband, gravely. "It was our duty to let you know at once."

The Duca della Spina rose painfully to his feet. He seemed quite unconscious of the tears he had shed, and too much shaken to take leave with any formality. Bosio stood quite still, when he had risen too, and his face was white. The old man passed him without a word, going to the door.

"My poor son! my poor Gianluca!" he repeated to himself, as Gregorio Macomer accompanied him.

Matilde and Bosio were left alone for a moment, but they knew that the count would return at once. They stood still, looking each at the other, with very different expressions.

Bosio felt that, in his place, a strong, brave man would have done something, would have stood up to deny the engagement, perhaps, or would have left the room rather than accept the situation in submissive silence, protesting in some way, though only Matilde should have understood the protest. She, on her side, slowly nodded her approval of his conduct, and in her dark eyes there was a yellow reflexion from the predominating colour of the room; there was triumph and satisfaction, and

there was the threat of the woman who dominates the man and is sure of doing with him as she pleases. Yet she was not so sure of herself as she seemed, and wished to seem, for she dreaded Bosio's sense of honour, which was not wholly dead.

"Do not deny it to Gregorio," she said, in a low tone, when she heard her husband's footstep returning through the room beyond.

Old Macomer came back and closed the door behind him.

"What is this?" he asked, at once; but though his voice was hard, it was trembling with the anticipation of a great victory. "Has Veronica consented?"

"No one has spoken to her," answered Bosio, before Matilde could speak.

"As though that mattered!" cried the countess, with contempt. "There is time for that!"

Gregorio's eyelids contracted with an expression of cunning.

"Oh!" he exclaimed thoughtfully, "I understand." He began to walk up and down in the narrow space between the furniture of the small sitting-room, bending his head between his high shoulders. "I see," he repeated. "I understand. But if Veronica refuses? You have been rash, Matilde."

"Veronica loves him," answered the countess. "And of course you know that he loves her," she

added, and her smooth lips smiled. "You need not deny it before us, Bosio. You have loved her ever since she came from the convent—"

"I?" Bosio's pale face reddened with anger.

"See how he blushes!" laughed Matilde. "As for Veronica, she will talk to no one else. They are made for each other. She will die if she does not marry Bosio soon."

The yellow reflexion danced in her eyes, as she fastened them upon her brother-in-law's face, and he shuddered, remembering what she had said before the Duca had come.

"If that is the case," said Macomer, "the sooner they are married, the better. Save her life, Bosio! Save her life! Do not let her die of love for you!"

He, who rarely laughed, laughed now, and the sound was horrible in his brother's ears. Then he suddenly turned away and left the room, still drily chuckling to himself. It was quite unconscious and an effect of his overwrought and long-controlled nerves.

Matilde and Bosio were alone again, and they knew that he would not come back. Bosio sank into his chair again, and pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes, resting his elbows on his knees.

"The infamy of it!" he groaned, in the bitterness of his weak misery.

Matilde stood beside him, and gently stroked

his hair where it was streaked with grey. He moved impatiently, as though to shake off her strong hand.

"No," she said, and her voice grew as soft as velvet. "It is to save me — to save us all."

He shook her off, and rose to his feet with spasmodic energy.

"I cannot — I will not — never!" he cried, walking away from her with irregular steps.

"But it will be so much better — for Veronica, too," she said softly, for she knew how to frighten him.

He turned with startled eyes. Then, with the impulse of a man escaping from something which he is not strong enough to face, he reached the door in two quick strides, and went out without looking back.

Matilde watched the door, as it closed, and stood still a few seconds before she left the room. Her eyes wandered to the clock, and she saw that it was nearly midnight.

The look of triumph faded slowly from her face, and the brows contracted in a look which no one could easily have understood, except Bosio himself, perhaps, had he still been there. The smooth lips were drawn in and tightly compressed; and she held her breath, while her right hand strained upon her left with all her might. Then the lips parted with a sort of little snap as she drew breath again;

and she turned her head suddenly, and looked behind her, growing a trifle paler, as though she expected to see something startling.

She tried to smile, and roused herself, rang the bell for the servant to put out the lights, and left the room. It was long before she slept that night. In the next room she could hear Gregorio's slow and regular footsteps, as he walked up and down without ceasing. In his own room upstairs, Bosio Macomer sat staring at the ashes of the burnt-out fire on his hearth. Only Veronica was asleep, dreamless, young, and restful.

CHAPTER III.

NAPLES, more than any other city of Italy, is full of the violent contrasts which belong to great old cities everywhere, and the absence of which makes new cities dull, be they as well built, as well situated, as civilized and as beautiful as they can be made by art handling nature for the greater glory of modern humanity.

In Naples, there is a fashionable new quarter, swept, watered, and garnished with plants and trees, but many of the great palaces stand in old and narrow streets, rising up, grim and solemn and proud, out of the recklessly vital life of one of the worst populaces in the world. Fifty paces away, again, is a wide thoroughfare, perhaps, raging and roaring with traffic from the port. A hundred yards in another direction, and there is a clean, deserted court, into which the midday sun pours itself as into a reservoir of light, — a court with a quiet church and simple old houses, through the doors of which pale-faced ecclesiastics silently come and go.

Round the next corner leads a dark lane, between hugely high buildings that press the air and keep

out the sun and all sky but a thin ribband of blue. And the air is heavy with all vile things, from the ill-washed linen that hangs, slowly drying, from the upper windows, thrust out into the draught with sticks, to the rotting garbage in the gutters below. The low-arched doors open directly upon the slimy, black pavement; and in the deep shadows within sit strange figures with doughy faces and glassy eyes, breathing in the stench of the nauseous, steamy air, — working a little, perhaps, at some one of the shadowy, back-street trades of a great city, but poisoned to death from birth by the air they live in, diseased of the diseased, from very childhood, and prolific as disease itself, multiplying to fatten death at the next pestilence.

And then, again, a vast square, gaudy with coloured handbills, noisy with wheels and the everlasting Neapolitan chattering of a thick-lipped, loud, degenerate dialect. There the little one-horse cabs tear hither and thither, drivers lashing their wretched beasts, wheels whirling, arms gesticulating, bad eyes flashing and leering, thick lips chattering everlastingly: and the tram-cars roll along, crowded till the people cling to one another on the steps; and the small boys dodge in and out between the cars and the carriages and the horses and the foot-passengers, some screaming out papers for sale, some looking for pockets to

pick, some hunting for stumps of cigars in the dust, — dirty, ragged, joyous, foul-mouthed, God-forsaken little boys; and then through the midst of all, as a black swan swimming stately through muddy waters, comes a splendid, princely equipage, all in mourning, from the black horses to the heavy veil just raised across a young widow's white face — and so, from contrast to contrast, through the dense city, and down to the teeming port, and out at last to the magic southern sea, where the clean life of the white-sailed ships passes silently, and scarce leaves a momentary wake to mar the pure waters of the tideless bay.

But there is life everywhere, — reckless, excessive, and the desire for life as a supreme good, worth living for its own sake — even if it is to be food for the next year's pestilence — a life that can support itself on anything, and thrive in its own fashion in the flashing sun, and the dust and the dirt, and multiply beyond measure and mysteriously fast. Only here and there in the swarm something permanent and fossilized stands solid and unchanging, and divides the flight of the myriad ephemeral lives — a monument, a church, a fortress, a palace: or, perhaps, the figure of some man of sterner race, with grave eyes and strong, thin lips, and manly carriage, looms in the crowd, and by its mere presence seems to send all the rest down a step to a lower level of humanity.

Such a man was Taquisara, the Sicilian, of whom the old Duca della Spina had spoken. He had no permanent abode in Naples, but lived in a hotel down by the public gardens, beyond Santa Lucia; and on the day after the Duca had been to see the Countess Macomer, he strolled up as usual, by short cuts and narrow streets, to see his friend Gianluca in the Spina palace, in the upper part of the city. Many people looked at him, as he went by, and some knew him for a Sicilian, by his face, while some took him for a foreigner, and pressed upon him to beg, or made faces and vile gestures at him, as soon as he could not see, after the manner of the lower Neapolitans. But he passed calmly on, supremely indifferent, his handsome, manly face turning neither to the right nor the left.

He might have stood for the portrait of a Saracen warrior of the eleventh century, with his high, dark features and keen eyes, his even lips, square jaw, and smooth, tough throat. He had, too, something of the Arabian dignity in his bearing, and he walked with long, well-balanced steps, swiftly, but without haste, as the Arab walks barefooted in the sand, not even suspecting that weariness can ever come upon him; erect, proud, without self-consciousness, elastic; cllected and ever ready, in his easy and effortless movement, for sudden and violent action. He was not pale, as dark Italians are, but his skin had the colour and look of fresh light bronze, just

chiselled, and able to reflect the sun, while having a light of its own from the strong blood beneath. That was the reason why the Neapolitans who did not chance to have seen Sicilians often, took him for a foreigner and got into his way, holding out their hands to beg, and making ape-like grimaces at him behind his back. But those who knew the type of his race and recognized it, did nothing of that sort. On the contrary, they were careful not to molest him.

The friend whom he sought, high up in the city, in a luxurious, sunlit room overlooking the harbour and the wide bay, was as unlike him as one man could be unlike another — white, fair-haired, delicate, with soft blue eyes and silken lashes, and a passive hand that accepted the pressure of Taquisara's rather than returned it — the pale survival of another once conquering race.

Gianluca was evidently ill and weak, though few physicians could have defined the cause of his weakness. He moved easily enough when he rose to greet his friend, but there was a mortal languor about him, and an evident reluctance to move again when he had resumed his seat in the sun. He was muffled in a thickly wadded silk coat of a dark colour. His fair, straight hair was brushed away from his thin, bluish temples, and the golden young beard could not conceal the emaciation of his throat when his head leaned against the back of his easy-chair.

Taquisara sat down and looked at him, lighted a black cigar and looked again, got up, stirred the fire and then went to the window.

"You are worse to-day," he said, looking out. "What has happened?" He turned again, for the answer.

"It is all over," said Gianluca. "My father was there last night. She is betrothed to Bosio Macomer."

His voice sank low, and his head fell forward a little, so that his chin rested upon his folded hands. Taquisara uttered an exclamation of surprise, and bit the end of his cigar.

"She? To marry Bosio Macomer? No — no — I do not believe it."

"Ask my father," said Gianluca, without raising his eyes. "Bosio was there, in the room, when they told my father the news."

"No doubt," said Taquisara, beginning to walk up and down. "No doubt," he repeated. "But —" He lit his cigar instead of finishing the sentence, and his eyes were thoughtful.

"But — what?" asked his friend, dejectedly. "If it had not been true, they would not have said it. It is all over."

"Life, you mean? I doubt that. Nothing is over, for nothing is done. They are not married yet, are they?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then they may never marry."

"Who can prevent it? You? I? My father? It is over, I tell you. There is no hope. I will see her once more, and then I shall die. But I must see her once more. You must help me to see her."

"Of course," answered Taquisara. "But what strange people you are!" he exclaimed, after a moment's pause. "Who can understand you? You are dying for love of her. That is curious, in the first place. I understand killing for love, but not dying oneself, just by folding one's hands and looking at the stars and repeating her name. Then, you do nothing. You do not say, 'She shall not marry Macomer, because I, I who speak, will prevent it, and get her for myself.' No. Because some one has said that she will marry him, you feel sure that she will, and that ends the question. For the word of a man or a woman, all is to be finished. You are all contemplation, no action — all heart, no hands — all love, no anger! You deserve to die for love. I am sorry that I like you."

"You always talk in that way!" said Gianluca, with a wearily sad intonation. "I suppose that life is different in Sicily."

"Life is life, everywhere," returned the Sicilian. "If I love a woman, it is not for the pleasure of loving her, nor for the glory of having it written on

my tombstone that I have died for her. It is better that some one else should die and that I should have what I want. How does that seem to you? Is it not logic? It is true that I have never loved any woman in that way. But then, I am young, though I am older than you are."

"What can I do?" The pale young man smiled sadly and shook his head. "You do not understand our society. I cannot even see her except at a distance, unless they choose to permit it. I cannot write love letters to her, can I? In our world one cannot do such things, and it would be of no use if I could —"

"I would," said Taquisara. "I would write. I would see her — I would empty hell and drag Satan out by the hair to help me, if the saints would not. But you! You sit still and die of love. And when you are dead, what will you have? A fine tomb out in the country, and lights, and crowns, and some masses — but you will not get the woman you love. It is not love that consumes you. It is imagination. You imagine that you are going to die, and unless you recover from this, you probably will. With your temperament, the best thing you can do is to come with me to Sicily and forget all about Donna Veronica Serra. No woman would ever look at a man who loves as you do. She might pity you enough to marry you, if no one else presented himself just then; but when she was tired of pitying

you she would love some one else. It is not life to be always pitying. That is the business of saints and nuns — not of men and women."

Gianluca was hurt by his friend's tone.

"You admit that you never were in love," he said; "how can you understand me?"

"That is just it! I do not understand you. But if I were you, I would take matters into my own hands. I will wager anything you please that Donna Veronica has never so much as heard that you wish to marry her —"

"But they have told her, of course!" interrupted Gianluca. "They have asked her —"

"Who told you so?" inquired Taquisara, incredulously. "And if any one has told you, why should you believe it? There are several millions on the one side, which Macomer wishes to possess, and there can be nothing on the other but the word of one of the interested persons. You have met her in the world and exchanged a few words — that has been all —"

"I have spoken with her five times," said Gianluca, thoughtfully.

"Have you counted?" Taquisara smiled. "Very good — five times — seventeen, if you like — you, sitting on the edge of your chair and opening your eyes wide to see her profile while she was looking at her aunt — you, saying that it was a fine day, or that Tamagno was a great singer; and she, say-

ing 'yes' to everything. And you love her. Well, no doubt. I could love a woman with whom I might never have spoken at all — surely — and why not? But you take it for granted that she knows you love her and expects you to ask for her, and has been told that you have done so and has herself dictated the refusal. You are credulous and despondent, and you are not strong. Besides, you sit here all day long, brooding and doing nothing but expecting to die, and hoping that she will shed a tear when she hears of your untimely end. Is that what you call making love in Naples?"

"I have told you that I can do nothing."

"It does not follow that there is nothing to be done."

"What is there, for instance?"

"Go to the Palazzo Macomer and find out the truth yourself. Write to her — take your place before the door and stand there day and night until she sees you and notices you." Taquisara laughed. "Do anything — but do not sit here waiting to die in cotton wool with your feet to the fire and your head in the clouds."

"All that is absurd!" answered Gianluca, petulantly.

"Is it absurd? Then I will begin by doing it for you, and see what happens."

"You?" The younger man turned in surprise.

"I. Yes. All the more, as I have nothing to

lose. I will go and find Bosio Macomer and talk with him — "

"You will insult him," said Gianluca, anxiously. "There will be a quarrel — I know you — and a quarrel about her."

"Why should we quarrel?" asked Taquisara. "I will congratulate him on his betrothal. I know him well enough for that, and in the course of conversation something may appear which we do not know. Besides, if I go to the house, I may possibly meet Donna Veronica; if I do, I shall soon know everything, for I will speak to her of you. I know her."

"One sees that you are not a Neapolitan," said Gianluca, smiling faintly.

"No," answered the other, "I am not." And he laughed with a sort of quiet consciousness of strength which his friend secretly envied. "It is true," he added, "that things look easy to me here, which would be utterly impossible in Palermo. We are different with our women — and we are different when we love. Thank Heaven, for the present — I am as I am."

He smiled and relit his cigar, which had gone out.

"No," said Gianluca. "You have never been in love, I think."

His fair young head leaned back wearily against the chair, and his eyes were half closed as he spoke.

"Nor ever shall be, in your way, my friend,"

answered the Sicilian, rising from his seat. "I suppose it is because we are so different that we have always been such good friends. But then — one need not look for reasons. It is enough that it is so."

Again he took the delicate, thin hand in his and pressed it, and went away, much more anxious about Gianluca than he was willing to show. For though he had suspected much of what he now saw, as a possibility, it was a phase too new and startling not to trouble him greatly. It will readily be conceived that if Gianluca had always been the weak and dejected and despairing individual from whom Taquisara parted that morning, there could never have been much friendship between the two. But Gianluca, not in love, had been a very different person. With an extremely delicate organization and a very sensitive nature, he was naturally of a gay and sunny temper. The two had done voluntary military service in the same regiment during more than a year, and their rank, together with the fact that they were both from the south, had in the first place drawn them together. Before long they had become firm friends. In his normal condition Gianluca, though never strong, was brave, frank, and cheerful. Taquisara thought him at times poetic and visionary, but liked the impossible loftiness of his young ideals, because Taquisara himself was naturally attracted by all that

looked impossible. Amongst a number of rather gay and thoughtless young men, who jested at everything, Gianluca adhered to his faith openly, and no one thought of laughing at him. He must have possessed something of that wonderful simplicity, together with much of the extraordinary tact, which helped some of the early saints to be what they were — the saints who were beloved rather than those who were persecuted. Not, indeed, that his conduct was always saintly, by any means, nor his life without reproach. But in an existence which ruins many young men forever he preserved an absolutely unaffected admiration for everything good and high and true, and had the rare power of asserting the fact, now and then, without being offensive to others. Taquisara had no desire to imitate him, but was nevertheless very strongly attracted by him, and if Gianluca had ever needed a defender, the Sicilian would have silenced his enemies at the risk of his own life. Gianluca, however, was universally liked, and had never been in need of any such old-fashioned assistance.

Since he had been in love with Veronica Serra, he was completely changed, and it was no wonder that his friend was anxious about him. Taquisara, like most men of perfectly healthy mind and body, would have found it hard to believe that Gianluca was merely lovesick, and was literally

'consuming himself,' even to the point of death, in an unrequited passion. It was certainly true, however, that he had lost strength rapidly and without the influence of any illness which could be defined, ever since the negotiations for Veronica's hand had shown signs of coming to an unsatisfactory conclusion. And they had lasted long. Many letters had been exchanged. The old Duca had been several times to the Palazzo Macomer, and the count and countess had found many reasons by which to put off their decision. For Gianluca was a good match, and altogether an exceedingly desirable young man, and the countess had always thought that if she could not marry Veronica to Bosio, it might be wisest to accept Gianluca. He was always in delicate health, Matilda reflected, and he might possibly die and leave his wife still absolute mistress of her fortune, if the marriage contract were cleverly framed with a view to that contingency.

But the young man himself had been diffident from the beginning, and at the first hesitation on the other side he had taken it for granted that all was lost. His slight vitality sank instantly under the disappointment, he refused to eat, he could not sleep, and he was in a really dangerous state before ten days had passed. Then he had sent for Taquisara, who visited him daily for nearly a week, encouraging him in every way, until to-day, when

the news of the refusal was no more to be denied. It was characteristic of the Sicilian that he at once attempted to interfere with destiny in favour of his friend. He was not a man to lose time when time was precious. His ardent temper loved difficulties, even when they were not his own. Bold, untiring, discreet, and loyal, if there were anything to be done in Gianluca's case, he was the man to do it.

Bosio Macomer was somewhat surprised that morning, when his old servant informed him that Taquisara was at the door. He knew him but slightly in the way of acquaintance, though very well by name and reputation, and he wondered what had brought him at that hour. He was inclined to say that he could not receive him, offering as an excuse that he was ill, which was almost true. But he reflected that such a man must have a good reason for wishing to see him. He remembered, too, that the Duca had spoken of him as Gianluca's friend, and in the terrible position in which Bosio himself was placed, it seemed to him possible that one of Gianluca's friends might help him, — how, he had not the power of concentrating his mind enough to guess, — and he ordered the servant to admit him.

Bosio had not slept that night. He had spent the six hours between midnight and the December dawn in his easy-chair before the fireplace. Once

or twice, towards morning, he had felt sleep creeping upon him through sheer physical exhaustion, but he had fought it off, afraid to lose one of the precious moments which he still had before him in which to think over what he should do. They were few enough, for a man of his nature.

He knew the absolute truth of all that Matilde had told him, and he had even suspected much of it before she had first spoken. He knew that his brother had secretly ruined himself in financial speculations, in which he had employed Lamberto Squarci as his agent, and that, with Squarci's assistance, Gregorio had staved off the consequences of his actions by a fraudulent use of Veronica's fortune, — of such part of it as he could control, of course, — absorbing much of the enormous income, and even, from time to time, obtaining the consent of Cardinal Campodonico for the sale of certain lands, on pretence of making more profitable investments. During fully ten years, Gregorio's management of the estate must have been a systematic fraud upon Veronica Serra, carried on with sufficient skill to evade all inquiry from the cardinal. Gregorio's fictitious reputation as a strictly honourable man had helped him, together with the fact that his wife was the ward's own aunt, which was a strong presumption in favour of her honesty as a guardian. Then, too, it was generally believed that Macomer was a miser, and much richer than he

allowed any one to suppose. As for the accounts of the estate, they could bear inspection, as Matilde had said, provided that no attempt were made to verify the existence of all the property therein described.

The worst of the case was that Squarci had been an accomplice from the beginning, and had doubtless enriched himself while Macomer had lost everything. In the event of a suit brought by the ward against the guardians, it would be in Squarci's power to turn evidence in favour of Veronica, and expose the whole enormous theft; and it would be like him to keep on the side of wealth against ruin. For Veronica was still very rich, in spite of all that had been stolen.

There could be little doubt but that in the event of an action, Gregorio and Matilde Macomer would be condemned to penal servitude, as the countess herself anticipated. It was equally certain that if Veronica married any one but Bosio, her husband and his family would demand that the accounts of the estate should be formally audited and the property scheduled; this must ultimately lead to the dreaded prosecution, which could have no possible conclusion but conviction and infamy.

Whatever Bosio's true relations with Matilde had been in the course of the last ten years, he had at least loved her faithfully, with the complete devotion of a man who not only loves a

woman, but is morally dominated by her in all the circumstances of life. He had not the character which seeks ideals, and he asked for none.

Matilde's beauty and conversation had sufficed him, for in his opinion he had never known any one to be compared with her; and on her side she had been strong enough to make a slave of him from the first. To the extent of his weak character and considerable physical courage, there was no sacrifice which Bosio would not have been ready to make for her, and few dangers which he would not at least have attempted to face for her sake.

But where all moral sense of right and all natural action of conscience were gone, there remained in the man an inheritance of traditional feeling, which even Matilde's influence could not make him wittingly violate any further,—a remnant of honour, a thread, as it were, by which his soul was still held above the level of total destruction. There was nothing, perhaps, involving himself alone, which he would have refused to do for Matilde's sake, under the pressure of her strong will. But what she required of him now was more than that, and worse. After a night of thought, he still felt that he could not do it.

Of course, there was the possibility that Veronica herself might absolutely refuse to marry him, and thus save his weakness from the necessity of trying to be strong. But Bosio thought this improbable.

The fatherless and motherless girl had been purposely kept from all outside influences by Gregorio and Matilde, in order that they might control her disposition for their own interests. She had been taught to expect that in due time they would select a husband for her from the men who might offer themselves, and that it would be more or less her duty to accept their decision, as being really the best for her own happiness. They had hindered her from forming friendships with girls of her own age, and altogether from acquaintanceship with young married women, excepting Bianca Corleone, who had been her friend in the convent. In society, when she went with them, men were introduced to her very rarely. Bosio had been present once or twice on such occasions, and he remembered having seen her with Gianluca. It had been very much as Taquisara had described it to Gianluca himself — a mere exchange of a few words, while the girl watched her aunt almost all the time with a sort of childish fear of doing something not quite right. Veronica could not be said to know any man to the extent of exchanging ideas with him, except her uncle and Bosio himself. And she liked Bosio very much. It was not at all improbable, considering all the circumstances, that she might be delighted with the idea of marrying him, merely because she liked him, and he was familiar in her daily life. Bosio knew that Matilde would

speak to her about it at once; and when he tried to think what he should do if Veronica readily accepted the proposition, the pain in his head grew intolerable, and he found it impossible to think connectedly. The horrible dishonour of it stared him in the face — and beyond the dishonour, still more fearfully imposing, rose the vision of sure disgrace and infamy for the woman he loved, if he himself refused to do this vile deed.

He looked ill, worn out with mental distress and physical exhaustion, when Taquisara entered the room, and the servant closed the door. The Sicilian came forward, and Bosio rose to meet him, still wondering why he had come, but far too much disturbed by his own troubles to care. Nevertheless, he supposed that the matter must be of some importance. Taquisara was surprised by his appearance, for he was evidently suffering.

"I ought almost to ask you to excuse me for having received you, in my condition," said Bosio, politely. "I have a violent headache. But I am wholly at your service. In what can I be of use to you?"

Taquisara found himself in an awkward position. He had expected to find Bosio Macomer radiant and ready to be congratulated by any one who chose to knock at his door. Instead, he found a man apparently both ill and distressed. He hesitated a moment, for he knew Bosio but slightly, after all.

"I do not know whether you will think it strange that I should come," he said, and his square face grew more square as he looked straight at Bosio. "I am Gianluca della Spina's best friend."

"Ah! Yes — I think I have heard so," answered Bosio, not startled, but considerably disturbed, as his gentle eyes met Taquisara's bold glance.

"I have come, as a friend, to ask whether it is really true that you are to marry Donna Veronica Serra," continued Taquisara, feeling that after all he might as well go straight to the point.

Bosio straightened himself a little in his chair, and there was a look of surprise in his face. But he hesitated an instant, in his turn.

"That was the answer which my brother and his wife gave to the Duca della Spina," he replied coldly.

"Yes," said Taquisara. "I know it was. That is the reason why I have come to you, directly, as Gianluca's friend."

"Does Don Gianluca propose to call me out, because he cannot marry Donna Veronica?" asked Bosio, in surprise, and in a tone which showed that he was already offended.

"No. He is very ill, and in no condition for that sort of amusement."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Bosio, with cold civility. "But you come to represent him, in some way. Do I understand?"

"He is ill — of love, as they say." Taquisara

smiled at the idea, in spite of himself. "It is serious, at all events — so serious, that I have come in person to ask whether it is really true that you are betrothed to Donna Veronica, in order that I may take him the truth as I hear it from your lips. I daresay you think me indiscreet, Count Macomer, for I am only slightly acquainted with you. But I am sincerely devoted to Gianluca, and if you were a total stranger to me, I should come to you as I have come now."

"And if I refuse to answer your question, Baron Taquisara — what then?"

"As the answer — yes or no — cannot possibly involve anything in the slightest degree indelicate, I shall of course infer that you have no answer to give, and that the matter is not yet really settled."

Bosio's eyebrows contracted spasmodically, and his white hand stroked his silky beard, while his eyes turned quickly from his guest and looked down at the carpet. In two passes, as though they had been fencing together, this singularly direct man had thrust him to the wall, and was forcing him to make a decision. Of course it was still in his power to answer in one way or the other, though he was yet undecided. But he honestly could not bring himself to say that he would marry Veronica, and yet, if he denied that he was betrothed to her, he must put his brother and Matilde in the position of having told a deliberate lie to Gianluca's

father. He felt that he was growing confused, and that his hesitation and confusion were every moment making it clearer to Taquisara that the betrothal was by no means as yet a fact. He tried to temporize.

"It depends upon what you understand by an engagement," he said. "With us, here in Naples, the betrothal means the signing of the marriage contract. Now, the contract has not even been discussed. I think that my brother's announcement was premature, though it was perhaps justifiable, as he wished to discourage any false expectations on the part of Don Gianluca."

"I am not a diplomatist," answered the Sicilian. "The statement was categorical — that you were betrothed to Donna Veronica. For the sake of my friend, I am indiscreet enough to wish to hear the confirmation of the statement from your own lips, without in the least questioning the right of the Count Macomer to make it last night. Gianluca is honestly and very deeply in love. The happiness of his whole life is involved. With his delicate constitution and sensitive temper, I believe that his life itself is in danger. You will be doing him an honourable kindness in letting him know the truth, through me."

"I will," said Bosio, absently, "I will — as soon as — " He checked himself and glanced nervously at Taquisara.

"As soon as you yourself have decided," said the latter, quietly. "I think I understand. Your brother and the countess feel quite sure of the fact, as though it had already taken place, but for some reason which does not concern me, you yourself are not so certain of the result. To be plain, there is still a possibility that the marriage may not take place. I need not tell you that in speaking to Gianluca I shall be very careful not to raise any false hopes in his mind. But I am exceedingly indebted to you for being so honourably frank with me."

Taquisara repressed a smile at his own words as he rose from his seat, for he was very far from wishing to offend Bosio. The latter rose, too, and looked at him with a dazed, uncertain expression, like a man not quite sure of being in his senses. He put out his hand mechanically, without speaking, and a moment later he was alone with the horror of his desperate difficulty.

The Sicilian descended the stairs slowly, and paused to look out of one of the big windows at a landing, which offered nothing in the way of a view but an almost blank wall on the other side of the narrow street. He did not know what to do next, and yet, being eminently a man of action, rather than of reflexion, he knew that he must do more to satisfy himself, for his suspicions were aroused. He had expected to find Bosio jubilant. From

what he had seen, he had understood well enough that there was some mysterious trouble. He could not hope to extort any information from Macomer or his wife, and he had no means of reaching Veronica, nor could he have asked direct questions if he had succeeded in seeing her.

Suddenly, he thought of the young Princess Corleone, whom he knew tolerably well, Corleone being a Sicilian like himself. She was Veronica's only intimate friend. She was the niece of Cardinal Campodonico, one of Veronica's guardians. If any one knew the truth, she might be expected to know it.

Taquisara looked at his watch, lit a cigar, and left the gloomy Palazzo Macomer, glad to be outside and to turn his face to the sunshine, and his back upon all the wickedness of which its old walls kept the secret.

CHAPTER IV.

THE villas along the shore towards Posilippo face the sun all day in winter, for they look due south from the water's edge, and their marble steps lead down into the tideless sea, as though it were a landlocked lagoon or a Swiss lake. In winter the roses blossom amongst the laurels, and before the rose leaves are all fallen the violets peep out in the borders; the broad, fan-like palms stand unsheltered in the south wind, and the oranges and lemons are left hanging on the trees for beauty's sake. There are but two changes in the year, from spring to summer, and from summer back to spring.

It is sometimes cold in Naples, high up in the city, when the northeast wind comes screaming from the snowy Abruzzi, and when Vesuvius is clad in white almost to the lower villages. In Naples it is sometimes dreary when the water-laden southwest sends up its mountains of black clouds. But somehow in soft Posilippo the wind is tempered and the rain seems but a shower, and spring and summer, summer and spring, ever join hands amongst the ilexes and the laurels and the orange trees.

On this day it was all summer, for there was not a cloud in the air nor a whitecap on the sea as the water gently lapped against the steps at the foot of Bianca Corleone's garden. It was so warm that she was sitting there herself, a book unread on her knees, her marvellous face towards the day, her small feet resting on the lower rail of another chair before her, just because the gravel might possibly be damp.

Beside her, and turned towards her, looking earnestly to her averted eyes, sat Pietro Ghisleri, the man who many years afterwards married Lady Herbert Arden, of whom many have heard,—a man young at that time and not world-worn as he was later, nor prematurely gaunt and weather-beaten. He was only five-and-twenty years of age, then, and the beautiful Bianca was but twenty-one, and had already been married two years to Corleone. But the suffering of a lifetime had been crushed into those two years; for Corleone was bad, from his head to his heart, all through, and she had believed that she loved him.

Then, half broken-hearted, she had listened to Ghisleri; and he loved her truly, with all his heart. Even society found little to say at that, and perhaps there was little enough to be said. To all intents and purposes, Corleone had abandoned her, and Ghisleri was often with her. It was not until later that her brother, Gianforte Campodo-

nico, lifted up his hand against Ghisleri for the first time.

So Ghisleri was sitting beside Bianca on that morning, in her garden, when there was a sound of wheels, behind the house; and then, unannounced, as one familiar with the place, Veronica Serra came swiftly down the walk towards the pair. Ghisleri rose to his feet, — a tall, fair man, sunburnt, lean and strong, with bright blue eyes, — and Bianca turned in her chair, with a smile, and held out her hand, as she sat, to the young girl.

"You do not mind?" asked Veronica, smiling innocently. "Am I not interrupting you?"

"No, dear — no." A very faint dawn of colour rose in Bianca's almost unnatural pallor.

"Something so strange has happened," said Veronica.

Then she nodded to Pietro Ghisleri, realizing that she had forgotten him. He moved forward for her the chair on which he had been sitting, while he continued to stand. Veronica had often met him there before.

"Donna Veronica has something to say to you," he said to Bianca. "If you will allow me, I will go up to the stable and look at that dog."

Bianca nodded, as though it were a matter of course that Pietro should look after her dogs when there was anything the matter with them, and Veronica sat down. Her expression was strange,

Bianca thought, as though she did not know whether to laugh or cry. Yet she looked fresh and well and not tired. The girl told her story in half a dozen words, as soon as Ghisleri was out of hearing.

"They want me to marry Bosio," she said, and then drew breath, holding both of Bianca's hands and looking into her eyes.

"You? Marry Bosio Macomer? Oh! no — Veronica — no!"

Bianca's voice expressed the greatest apprehension, for Veronica was almost her only intimate friend. Veronica seemed surprised.

"Why not?" she asked. "That is, if I wished to. Why do you speak in that way? Do you know anything about him which I do not know? You must have some reason."

Bianca's exquisite face grew calm and grave, and she looked away, and waited some seconds before she spoke. The sins of the earth were familiar to her before her time, and the suffering and the payment. But Veronica was a child.

"It seems unfitting," she said, quietly. "He is almost like your uncle. Of course, one may marry one's uncle — but he is too old for you, dear. And, after all, with your name, and all you have — "

"But I like Bosio," answered Veronica, simply. "He is always good to me. I talk with him a great deal. And he is really not old, though his hair is a

little grey. I think I would perhaps rather have him just for a friend, instead of a husband. But then, he would be both. I do not know what to do, so I came to you for advice."

"Why do you not marry Gianluca della Spina?" asked Bianca, suddenly.

"Don Gianluca?" repeated Veronica, rather blankly. "Why him, particularly? I have only seen him three or four times."

"He is dying of love for you, my dear," said Bianca. "At least, every one says so. I have heard it from Taquisara and from Signor Ghisleri, who are friends of his."

"Dying of love for me?" Veronica broke out in a girlish laugh. "How absurd! Why does he not ask for me, if that is true? Not that I would ever marry him! He is like a Perugino angel, with his yellow hair and blue eyes."

She laughed again. Bianca knew from Ghisleri that Gianluca's father had done his best to bring about the marriage. She was amazed to find that Veronica knew nothing of the negotiations.

"It is very strange," she said thoughtfully, and hesitating as to how much she should tell of what she had heard.

"What is strange?" asked the young girl.

"That you should not have known about Gianluca. They go to see him every day. He is really madly in love with you, and is positively ill about it.

That is why I say that you should marry him, if you marry at all — but not your uncle Bosio."

"He is not my uncle," said Veronica. "He is my aunt's brother-in-law."

"It is the same thing — "

"No. It is not the same. Tell me all about Don Gianluca. It is interesting — I feel like a heroine in a book — a man dying for love of me, whom I scarcely know! It is too ridiculous! He must be in love with my fortune, as my aunt says that so many people are."

"No, dear," said Bianca, gravely, "do not say that. It is for yourself, and he does not need your fortune."

"I did not mean to say anything unkind," answered Veronica. "But I scarcely know him — and I have heard nothing about it. Have they spoken of the marriage?"

"Yes."

They were interrupted by a servant, who came quickly down from the house. The man asked if the princess would receive Baron Taquisara. Bianca ordered him to be admitted, and told the man to ask Ghisleri to come back from the stables.

"Do you know Taquisara?" she asked Veronica.

"A Sicilian? With a bronze face and fiery eyes? I have seen him once or twice at balls, I think. Yes — he was introduced to me somewhere. I

remember him because they say he is descended from Tancred."

"Yes," said Bianca. "I could not refuse to receive him, because Signor Ghisleri is here. They will both go away before long, and then we can talk. Can you stay to breakfast with me?"

"Oh, no! I should not dare to do that!" Veronica laughed a little. "No one knows where I am," she added. "My aunt thinks I have gone for a drive to think over the matter. I just pulled down the curtain of the brougham and told the man to bring me here — all alone."

At this moment Taquisara and Ghisleri appeared on the gravel path, walking side by side, two men strongly contrasted with each other, Italians of the Lombard and the Saracen types, fine specimens both, in the prime of youth and strength. Bianca gave the Sicilian her hand, and he bowed gravely to Veronica. Ghisleri brought out more chairs, and without the slightest hesitation sat down beside Bianca, forcing Taquisara to place himself near the young girl.

Taquisara was a man almost incapable of anything like social timidity, in whatever position he might be placed, and he was in reality delighted at thus being thrust upon Donna Veronica, from whom he felt sure that he should learn something about the projected marriage. For he had great and unaffected confidence in himself. But he hesitated a moment

before he spoke, for he did not now remember that he had ever before entered intentionally into a serious conversation with a young girl, in the whole course of his life. The customs of the society in which he lived made such things well-nigh impossible. As usual with him, he meditated going straight to the matter in hand, and he only paused to consider what words he should use. Veronica, as she had been taught to do in such a position, looked vacantly before her at the roots of the trees, waiting for him to say something.

He had not seen her, except from a distance, since Gianluca had fallen so madly in love with her, and while she looked away from him, his bold eyes scrutinized her face. He saw what she had seen, when she had looked into the glass on the previous evening — neither more nor less, except that she was dressed for walking, and something feathery was around her slender throat — and she wore a hat, which, in her own opinion, changed her appearance very much. But, as he looked, he was aware that there was more in her face than he had supposed.

There was something in the expression which was, all at once, far more beautiful to him, than anything he had ever discovered in the sad and faultless features of the already famous beauty who sat beside her. Unconsciously, as he realized it, he forgot that he was expected to speak.

Then, wondering at his silence, and conscious of his gaze, Veronica turned her face to his, with a shy look of girlish inquiry, and their eyes met. Taquisara was too dark to blush, but to his own surprise he felt that the blood had mounted in his face, and in Veronica's own thin, young cheeks there was a faint and lovely tinge which lasted but a moment and then faded, coming again more strongly as she turned her eyes away. Then he felt that he must speak. Ghisleri and Bianca, on the other side, had begun at once to talk, and their voices, unknown to themselves, had sunk to a low key.

"I am very glad I have met you here, this morning, Donna Veronica," said Taquisara, leaning forward so as to speak close to her, but looking down at the gravel under his feet. "I had something especial to say to you."

Veronica glanced at him, half startled. His tone and manner were quite different from anything she had hitherto heard and seen. She saw that he was not looking at her, and her eyes went back to the roots of the trees.

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly, for she did not know whether he expected her to say anything.

"I have a very good friend, Donna Veronica," he continued; "I have been with him this morning. You have heard his name often of late, I think, and you know him — Gianluca della Spina."

Veronica started a little, and again the colour came and went in her delicate face.

"Yes," she said. "I — I know him a little."

"He loves you, Donna Veronica," Taquisara said, his voice softening almost to a whisper, for he did not wish Bianca Corleone to hear him. "He loves you so much that he is almost dangerously ill — indeed, I think it is dangerous — because you will not marry him."

He paused to see what she would do. She quickly turned her startled eyes to him, and her lips parted, but she said nothing. He raised his face and met her look as he went on.

"Last night, his father was at your house, and he was told that there was no hope, because you were betrothed to Count Bosio Macomer."

"They told him that?" asked Veronica, quickly, and the colour mounted a third time in her cheeks. "But it is not true!" she added; and her eyes set themselves sharply, for she was angry.

"No," said Taquisara, "I know that it is not quite true, for I have been to see Count Bosio. I was there half an hour ago."

"You have quarrelled?" asked Veronica, in sudden anxiety.

"Quarrelled? no. Why should we quarrel? He gave me to understand that nothing was settled. I thanked him, and came away. I did not hope to see you; but I knew that the Princess Corleone

was your best friend, as I am Gianluca's. I thought I would speak to her. Since, by a miracle, we have met, I have spoken directly to you. Do you forgive me? I hope so, though I daresay that no mere acquaintance has ever talked as I am talking. If you blame me, remember that it is for Gianluca, that he is my friend, that he knows nothing of my speaking to you, since you and I have met by chance, and that he is perhaps dying — dying for you, Donna Veronica."

The girl's face was white and grave now, for Taquisara spoke in earnest.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed.

Bianca turned her head, for she was not so much absorbed in her conversation with Ghisleri as not to have noticed that Veronica and Taquisara were speaking almost in whispers, which was strange conduct for a young girl with a mere acquaintance, to say the least of it.

"What is so dreadful?" she asked, with a smile.

"Oh! — nothing," answered Veronica, glancing at her, and turning back instantly to Taquisara.

A shade of annoyance was in his face, and Veronica felt suddenly that this was the first real crisis in her life, and that she must hear all he had to say, to the end, at any cost of propriety.

"Come!" she said to Taquisara.

She rose as calmly as a married woman, many years older than she, might have done, and Taqui-

sara was on his feet at the same moment. She led the way down to the marble steps that descended to the sea, and stood on the uppermost one, looking out. Bianca and Ghisleri watched her in surprise and Bianca made a slight movement, as though to follow, but then leaned back again. There was then, and still is, a very strong feeling in Southern Italy against allowing a young girl to be out of earshot with a man.

Though Bianca and Veronica had been children together, and there was little difference of age between them, Bianca felt that, as the married woman, she was responsible for the observance of social custom. But in a moment she realized that Taquisara was talking of Gianluca, and that anything would be better than to allow Veronica to marry Bosio Macomer.

"I understand," she said to Ghisleri; "let them alone. It is better, so long as only you and I see it."

Down by the steps, Veronica stood very still, looking out over the blue water, and Taquisara was beside her. She waited for him to speak again, sure that he had not said all.

"Such things seem improbable in these days," he said quietly. "You say that it is dreadful. It is. I have seen it, and have been with him day after day. I am not very sensitive, as a rule, but I have had a strange impression which I shall never for-

get. Gianluca and I met when we were serving our time as volunteers. He was unlike the rest of us, even then. That was why we became friends — because he was unlike me, I suppose."

"Unlike — in what way?" asked Veronica, still looking at the sea.

"It is hard to explain. He is a man of ideals, a religious man, a good man." Taquisara smiled gravely. "That was enough to make him quite different from us all, was it not?"

"I do not know," said the young girl. "Are all men bad, as a rule?"

"Perhaps," answered the Sicilian, shortly. "At all events, Gianluca was not. One saw that all the little that was bad in his life was only a jest, while all the much that was good was real and true."

"You are indeed his friend," said Veronica, softly.

She was struck by the beauty of what the man had said so plainly and unaffectedly.

"Yes, I am his friend," replied Taquisara. "One of his friends, say, — for he has many. I am his friend as you are the friend of Donna Bianca. You understand that, do you not? And you understand that there is nothing you would not do for a friend? Not out of mere obligation, because your friend has done much for you, but just for friendship — love, if you choose to call it so. I have heard people speak eloquently of friendship — so have

you perhaps. And we both understand what it means, though many do not. That is why I speak as I do, and if I do not speak well, you must forgive me, and feel the meaning I cannot express to your ears. Gianluca loves you, Donna Veronica, as men very rarely love women, so immensely, so strongly, that his love is burning up his life in him — and it has all been kept from you for some reason or other, while your relations are doing their best to make you marry Bosio Macomer, who can no more be compared with Gianluca della Spina than —"

He checked himself, for he felt that his tone was contemptuous, and remembered that Veronica might perhaps like Bosio. She was listening, her eyes fixed on the distance, her mind wide open to the new experience of life which had come so unexpectedly.

"He cannot be compared with Gianluca," continued Taquisara, modifying his sentence and omitting whatever simile had presented itself in his thoughts. "If you knew Gianluca, you would understand. It is because I know him well that I speak for him, that I implore you, pray you, beseech you, to see him before you consent to marry Count Bosio —"

"To see him!" exclaimed Veronica, startled at the sudden proposition, which was a blow to every tradition she had ever learned.

But the Sicilian was not a man to hesitate at trifles where women were concerned, nor men either.

"Yes — to see him!" he answered with a certain vehemence. "Is it a sin? Is it a crime? Is it dishonourable? Why should you cry out? What is society that it should take you young girls by the throat, like martyrs, and chain you with proprieties to the stake of its rigid law — to be burnt to death afterwards by slow fire, like your best friend there, Donna Bianca? Ah — you understand that. You know her life, and I know it too. It is the life — or the death — to which you may look forward if you will neither open your eyes to see, nor raise your hand to guard yourself. And you cry out in outraged horror at the idea of seeing Gianluca della Spina here, in this garden, by these steps, under God's sunlight, as you see me here to-day by accident. It seems to you — what shall I say? — unladylike!" Taquisara laughed scornfully. "What does it matter whether you are unladylike or not, so long as you are womanly, and kind, and brave? I am telling you truths you have never heard, but you have a woman's right to hear them, whatever you may think of me. And I speak for another. I have the holy right to say for him, for his life, for his happiness, all that I would not say for myself, perhaps. And I do say, what is to prevent Gianluca from being here to-morrow, or this very afternoon,

as I am here now, and why should it be such a dreadful thing for you to come here, knowing that you will meet him? Do you think that he would not give the last drop of his blood, at one word from your lips, to save you from trouble, or danger, or insult? Do you think, if he knew how I am speaking to you — speaking roughly, perhaps, because I am rough — he would not turn upon me, his friend, who am fighting for his life, and quarrel with me, and disown me, because my roughness comes near you and may offend you? You do not know him. How should you? But because you do not know him and cannot guess how he loves you, do not throw his life away without seeing it, without understanding what you despise, and learning that it is far above your contempt — a noble life, an honest life, a true-hearted young life, which may be lived out for you only — and, for you, I think it would be worth living."

Taquisara was a man who could be in earnest for his friend, and there was a strong vibration in his low voice which few could have heard with indifference. While he was speaking and forcing the appeal of his honest black eyes upon Veronica's face, she could not help slowly turning to meet them, and her lips parted a little as though in wonder, while she drank in eagerly the words he spoke. It was the first time in her life that she had ever heard a man speak to her of love, and, in his rough

eloquence, he spoke well and strongly, though it was not for himself. In his own cause, the words might not have come so readily, but they were not now the less evidently sincere, because they were many. She was glad that she had boldly risen and left Bianca's side, in order to hear him. But when he paused, she scarcely knew what to answer. She wanted to hear more. It was as though a dawn were rising, high and clear, in the dim country through which childhood had led her, and she longed suddenly for the full light of broad day.

"Indeed, you speak as though you loved him," she said.

"Yes, but I am trying to tell you how he loves you, and I cannot, though I know it all. You must hear it for yourself, you must see him, you must know him —"

"But it is impossible —" Veronica's protest broke off rather weakly in the middle.

"It is impossible that you should be here to-morrow at this hour? Perhaps — I do not know. But to-morrow at this hour Gianluca will be here, though he has not been able to leave the house for a week; and if you come, all the impossibility is gone. It is as simple as that —"

"That is an appointment — with a man —"

Again the blood rushed to the young girl's face, but this time it was genuine shame of doing a

thing which she had been taught to think the most dreadful in the whole world.

"An appointment!" Taquisara laughed contemptuously. "Do you not come often to see the Princess Corleone? You will come again. And Gianluca will come often, too — and if you chance to meet to-morrow, it will be an accident of fate, that is all, as you chanced to see me here to-day. You cannot forbid him to come here. You cannot, without a reason, ask Donna Bianca to refuse to receive him —"

"Oh! — if she ever guessed —" Veronica checked herself, still blushing, but Taquisara was too sincerely in earnest to smile at the slip she had made.

"That is all," he said. "There is neither appointment, nor engagement, nor anything but the possibility of a meeting which you cannot be sure of avoiding, unless you never come to see your friend, or unless you give her some unjust reason for not letting him come, in case he calls. There is nothing but chance. How can I tell whether you will come to-morrow, or not? I shall perhaps never know, for I shall not come with him. I have been here to-day — what excuse could I give for calling again to-morrow? Donna Bianca would think it strange. I can hope, for his sake. I can tell you that no woman has the right to throw away such love as his, to ruin such a life as his, to break such a heart without a thought and with-

out so much as hearing the man speak — whatever this wretched society in which we live may say about proprieties and rights and wrongs, and the difference between the proper behaviour for young girls and married women. This is God's earth, Donna Veronica — not society's!"

Veronica said nothing; but there was perplexity in her face, and she looked down, and pulled at one finger of her glove. She was wondering whether, if she came on the next day, and stood with Gianluca della Spina on that very spot, he would speak for himself as strongly and well as his friend had been speaking for him.

Somehow, she doubted it, and somehow, too, she knew that if by magic Taquisara should all at once turn out to be the real Gianluca, — not the Gianluca she knew, — she should be better satisfied with the world. For as things seemed just then, she was not satisfied at all, and the future was more dim and uncertain than ever. Still she looked down, thinking, and Taquisara glanced at her occasionally, and respected her silence.

"You do not know Bosio Macomer," she said, at last. "Or you know him little. If you chanced to be his friend, instead of Don Gianluca's, you could speak as eloquently for him."

"I think not," answered Taquisara. And his lip curled a little, though she did not see the expression.

"Why not? You do not know him. How can you tell? A little while ago, you said that he was not to be compared to your friend. How can you be so sure? Everything is not written in men's faces."

"I judge as I can, from what I see and know."

"So do I."

"From seeing and knowing the one and not the other. That is it. All I ask is that you will wait until you know both, before you make up your mind — a week — no more, if you can spare no more. It is not for me to tell you what your rights are, that you are not in the position of the average young girl, just from the convent, who accepts the choice her father and mother make for her — because, perhaps, she may never have another; and, at all events, because she cannot choose. You have the world to choose from, and — forgive me for saying it — you have no one to choose for you but those who are interested in the choice. May I speak?"

She hesitated, and their eyes met for a moment.

"Yes," she said suddenly.

"Count Bosio may be the best of men. I do not know. But he is the middle-aged, younger brother of Count Macomer, with a very slender fortune of his own and a position no better than the rest of us. If he marries you, he becomes Prince of Acireale, a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, a Grandee of

Spain of the First Class — and many times a millionnaire. For you have all that to give the man you marry. Grant that he is the best of men. Is his brother wholly disinterested? I speak plainly. It is rumoured that Count Macomer has lost most of his fortune in speculations. I do not know whether that is true. Even if it is not, what was all his fortune compared to what it would mean to him if his brother held yours?"

"My uncle never speculated in his life!" answered Veronica, rather indignantly.

"Grant that. The other side remains. And the countess? Is she wholly disinterested? Has she been disappointed by the marriage she made, or not? She was born a Serra, like yourself, and she married Macomer in the days of the old court, when he was a favourite with the old king and had a brilliant position, and people said that he might be one of the first men in the kingdom. But Garibaldi swept all that away, and Macomer's chances with it, and the countess is a disappointed woman, for her husband has remained just what he always was — plain Count Macomer, with his name and his palace, neither of them extraordinary. Truly, Donna Veronica, though you may refuse to speak to me again for what I say, I will dare to tell you that you must be very unsuspicious! They conceal from you the honourable offer of such a man as Gianluca della Spina, the eldest son of a great old

house, and they announce your betrothal with Count Bosio before either you or he know of it. One need not be very distrustful to think all that strange — even granting that Count Bosio is the best of men, a matter of which you are a judge."

"I would rather that you should not say those things to me," said Veronica, a little pale, and turning half round as though she would go back to Bianca and Ghisleri.

"Forgive me — for I have risked such opinion of me as you may have, to say them. There may be reasonable doubt about them. But of the rest — there is no doubt. There is a man's life in it, and death is beyond doubts, and a love that can take a man and tear him and hurt him until he dies has a right to a woman's hearing — and to her charity — before she throws it away. I ask no forgiveness of you for saying that. Gianluca will come to-morrow at this time, and he will come again until he sees you. I have kept you too long, Donna Veronica, and you have been kind in listening to me. If you need service in your life, use mine."

She said nothing, but gravely inclined her head a little when she had once more looked into his eyes, before she turned towards Bianca and walked slowly up the short, broad path by his side.

CHAPTER V.

Bosio felt that if he remained in his room alone with the horror of his position, he should go mad before night. He was weakly resolved not to marry Veronica, but he knew and for the first time dreaded the power Matilde had over his thoughts as well as his actions. He felt that if he could avoid her, he could still cling to the remnant of honour, but that she would tear it from him if she could and cast it to the winds. The whole card-house of his ill-founded life was trembling under the breath of fate, and its near fall seemed to threaten its existence.

He went out and walked slowly through sunny, unfrequented places, high up in the city, trying to shake off the chill of his fear as a man hopes to rid himself of an ague by sitting in the sun. But the chill was in his heart, and it was his soul that shivered. He weakly wished that he were wholly bad, that he might feel less.

Then, in true Italian humour, he tried to think of something which might divert his thoughts from the duty of facing their own terrible perplexity. If it had been evening, he would have strolled into

the theatre; had it been already afternoon, he would have had himself driven out along the public garden towards Posilippo, to see the faces of his friends go by. But it was morning. There was nothing but the club, and he cared little for the men he might meet there. There was nothing to do, and his eyes did not help him to forget his troubles. He wandered on through ways broad and narrow, climbing up one steep lane and descending again by the next, hardly aware of direction and not noticing whether he went east or west, north or south, up or down.

At last, at a corner, he chanced to read the name of a street. It was familiar enough to him, as a Neapolitan, but just now it reminded him of something which might possibly help to distract his attention. He stopped and got out his pocket-book, and found in it a card, glanced at the address on it, and then once more at the name of the street. Then he went on till he came to the right number, entered a gloomy doorway, black with dampness and foul air, ascended four flights of dark stone steps, and stopped before a small brown door. The card nailed upon it was like the one he had in his pocket-book. The name was 'Giuditta Astarita,' and under it, in another character, was printed the word 'Somnambulist.'

There was nothing at all unnatural in the name or the profession, in Naples, where somnambulists

are plentiful enough. And the name itself was a Neapolitan one, and by no means uncommon. The card, however, was white and clean, which argued either that Giuditta Astarita had not long been a professional clairvoyante, or else that she had recently changed her lodgings. Bosio knew nothing about her, except that she had suddenly acquired an extraordinary reputation as a seer, and that many people in society had lately visited her, and had come away full of extraordinary stories about her power. He rang the little tinkling bell, which was answered by a very respectably dressed woman servant with only one eye, — a fact which Bosio noticed because it was the blind side of her face which first appeared as the door opened.

The Signora Giuditta Astarita was at home, and there was no other visitor. Bosio, without giving his name, was ushered into a small sitting-room, of which the only window opened upon a narrow court opposite a blank wall. The furniture was scant and stiff, and such of it as was upholstered was covered with a cheap cotton corded material of a spurious wine colour. There were small square antimacassars on the chairs, and two of them, side by side, on the back of the sofa. The single window had heavy curtains, now drawn aside, but evidently capable of shutting out all light. A solid, square, walnut table stood before the sofa, without any table-cloth, and upon it were arranged half a dozen

large books, bound with a good deal of gilding, and which looked as though they had never been opened.

Bosio was standing before the window, looking out at the blank wall, when he heard some one enter the room and softly close the door. Giuditta Astarita came forward as he turned round.

He saw a heavy, phlegmatic woman, still very young, though abnormally stout, with an unhealthy face, thin black hair and large weak eyes of a light china blue. Her lips were parted in a sort of chronic sad smile, which showed uneven and discoloured teeth. She wore a long trailing garment of heavy black silk, not gathered to the figure at the waist, but loose from the shoulders down, and buttoned from throat to feet in front, with small buttons, like a cassock. From one of the upper buttonholes dangled a thin gold chain, supporting a bunch of small charms against the evil eye, a little coral horn, a tiny silver hunchback, a miniature gilt bell, and two or three coins of gold and silver, besides an Egyptian scarabee in a gold setting. The woman remained standing before Bosio.

"You wish to consult me, Signore?" she inquired, in a professional tone, through the chronic smile, as it were. Her voice was very hoarse.

Bosio bowed gravely, whereupon she pointed to a chair for him, drew another into position for herself, opposite his, and at some distance from it, and then fumbled in the curtains for the cord that pulled them.

"If you will sit down," she said, "I will darken the room."

Bosio seated himself, and in a moment the light was shut out as the heavy curtains ran together. Then he heard the rustle of the woman's silk dress as she sat down opposite to him in the dark. He felt unaccountably nervous, and her china blue eyes had made a disagreeable impression upon him. He expected something to happen.

"I see a name over your head," said a clear, bell-like voice, certainly not Giuditta Astarita's. "It is Veronica."

Bosio started uneasily, though like most Neapolitans, he had visited somnambulists more than once.

"Who is speaking?" he asked quickly.

"It is the spirit," said the woman's hoarse tones. "That is his voice. Is there such a person as Veronica in your life? Is it about her that you wish to consult the spirits?"

"Yes," said the spirit voice, before Bosio could answer. "You are afraid that they will murder her, if you do not marry her — or if she will not marry you."

Bosio uttered a loud exclamation of alarm and astonishment, for this was altogether beyond anything in his experience.

"Is it so?" asked Giuditta Astarita.

"Yes. It is true," said Bosio, in uncertain tones. "And I wish to know — whether —" he stopped.

"Whether the grey-faced man and the handsome woman whose eyes are near together will really kill her?" asked the spirit voice.

Bosio felt his soft hair rising on his head. "Do you know who I am?" he asked nervously.

"No," replied the voice of Giuditta. "The spirits know everything, but I do not. They only speak through me with another voice. I do not know what they are going to say. You need have no apprehension. This is more sacred than the confessional, Signore, more secret than the tomb."

The phrase sounded as though it had been carefully studied and often repeated, but the dramatic tone in which it was uttered produced a certain reassuring effect upon Bosio, in his half-frightened state.

"Do you wish to tell whether they will really kill Veronica?" inquired Giuditta. "If you have any question to ask, you must put it quickly. I cannot keep the spirits waiting. They exhaust me when they are impatient."

"What shall I do to avoid marrying her?" asked Bosio, suddenly springing to the main point of his doubts.

"The handsome woman whose eyes are near together will make you marry Veronica," said the spirit voice.

"But if I refuse? If I say that I will not? What then? Is her life really in danger?"

"Yes. They wish to kill her to get her money. The handsome woman has her will leaving her everything if she dies."

"But will they really kill her?" insisted Bosio, half breathless in his fear and nervous excitement.

The spirit voice did not answer. In the silence Bosio heard Giuditta Astarita's breathing opposite to him.

"Will they really kill her?" he asked again.

Still there was silence, and Bosio held his breath. Then Giuditta spoke hoarsely.

"The spirit is gone," she said. "He will not answer any more questions to-day."

"Can you not call it back?" asked Bosio, anxiously, and peering into the blackness before him, as though hoping to see something.

"No. When he is gone he never comes back for the same person. He answered you many things, Signore. You must have patience."

He heard her rise, and a moment later the light dazzled him as he looked up and met her china blue eyes. He was dazed as well as dazzled, for there had been an extraordinary directness and accuracy about the few questions and answers he had heard in the clear voice which was so utterly unlike Giuditta's, though quite human and natural. He was certain that he had not heard the door open after she had drawn the curtains. He looked about the scantily furnished room, in search of

some corner in which some third person might have been hidden. Giuditta Astarita's chronic smile was momentarily intensified.

"There was no one else here," she said, answering his unspoken question. "You heard the spirit's voice through my ears."

"How can that be?"

"I do not know. But what the spirit says is true. You may rely upon it. I do not know what it said, for when I return from the trance state I remember nothing I have heard or seen while I have been in it. If you wish to ask more, you must have the kindness to come again. It is very fatiguing to me. You can see that I am not in good health. The hours are from ten till three."

The smile had subsided within its usual limits, and the china blue eyes stared coldly. She was evidently waiting to be paid.

"What do I owe you?" asked Bosio, with a certain considerateness of tone, so to say.

"It is twenty-five lire," answered Giuditta Astarita. "I have but one price. Thank you," she added, as he laid the notes upon the polished walnut table. "Do you wish a few of my cards? For your friends, perhaps. I shall be grateful for your patronage."

"Thank you," said Bosio, taking his hat and going towards the door. "I have one of your cards. It is enough. Good morning."

As he opened the door, he found the one-eyed serving-woman in the passage, ready to show him out. Instinctively he looked at the single eye as he glanced at her face, and he was surprised to notice that it was of the same uncommon china blue colour as Giuditta's own. The woman who did duty as a servant to admit visitors was undoubtedly Giuditta's mother or elder sister, or some very near relative. It would be natural enough, amongst such people, as Bosio knew, but he wondered how many more of the same family lived in the rooms beyond the one in which he had received spirit-communications, and whether Giuditta Astarita supported them all by her extraordinary talents.

He descended the damp stone stairs and passed out into the street again, dazed and disturbed in mind. He had been to such people before, as has been said, and he had generally seen or heard something which had either interested or amused him. He had never had such an experience as this. He had never heard a voice of which he had been so certain that it did not come from any one in the room, and he had never found any somnambulist who had so instantly grasped his most secret thoughts, without the slightest assistance or leading word from himself. Yet at the crucial test — the question of a certainty in the future, this one had stopped short as all stopped, or failed in their predictions of what was to come. He had been

startled and almost frightened. Like many Southern Italians, he was at once credulous and sceptical — a superstitious unbeliever, if one may couple the two words into one expression. His intelligence bade him deny what his temperament inclined him to accept. Besides, on the present occasion, no theory which he could form could account for the woman's knowledge of his life. She had never seen him. He had no extraordinary peculiarity by which she might have recognized him at first sight from hearsay, nor was he in any way connected with public affairs. He had come quite unexpectedly and had not given his name, and the spirit, or whatever it might be, had instantly told him of Veronica, of her danger, of his brother and sister-in-law and of the will. Moreover, the friends who had spoken to him of Giuditta Astarita had told him similar tales within a few days.

The spirit had said that the handsome woman would make him marry Veronica. But what had the silence meant, when he had asked more? That was the question. Did it mean that the spirit was unwilling to affirm that Veronica must die if he refused to marry her? He passed his hand over his eyes as he walked. This was the end of the nineteenth century; he was in Naples, in the largest city of an enlightened country. And yet, the situation might have been taken from the times of the Medici, of Paolo Giordano Orsini, of Beatrice Cenci,

of the Borgia. There was a frightful incongruity between civilization and his life — between broad, flat, comfortable, every-day, police-regulated civilization, and the hideous drama in which he was suddenly a principal actor.

More than once he told himself that he was mistaken and that such things could not possibly be; that it was all a feverish dream and that he should soon wake to see that there was a perfectly simple, natural and undramatic solution before him. But turn the facts as he would, he could not find that easy way. If he refused to marry Veronica and attempted to get legal protection for her, the inevitable result would be the prosecution, conviction, and utter ruin of his brother and of the woman he loved. If he refused to marry Veronica and did nothing to protect her, Matilde's eyes had told him what Matilde would do to escape public shame and open infamy. If he married Veronica and saved his brother — he was still man enough to feel that he could not do that. He could die. That was a possibility of which he had thought. But would his death, which would save him from committing the last and greatest baseness, save Veronica? She would have one friend less in the world, and she had not many.

With a half-childish smile on his pale face, he wondered what such a man as Taquisara would do, if he were so placed, and the Sicilian's manly face

and bold eyes rose up contemptuously before him. To such a depth as Bosio had already reached, Taquisara could never have fallen. Bosio's instinct told him that.

If he had been able to find one friend in all his acquaintance to whom he might turn and ask advice, it would have been an infinite relief. But such friends were rare, he knew, and he had never made one. Pleasant acquaintances he had, by the score and the hundred, in society, and amongst artists and men of letters. But the life he had led had shut out friendship. To have a friend would have been to let some one into his life, and that would have meant, sooner or later, the betrayal of the woman he loved.

Yet, though he felt that Taquisara was his enemy and not his friend, he had such sudden confidence in the man's honour and truth that he was insanely impelled to go to him and tell him all, and implore him to save Veronica at any cost, no matter what, or to whom. Then of course, a moment later, the thought seemed madness, and he only felt that he was losing hold more quickly upon his saner sense. His visit to the somnambulist, too, had helped to unnerve him, and as he wandered through the streets he forgot that it was time to eat, so that physical faintness came upon him unawares and suddenly.

He did not wish to go home; for if he did, the

final decision would be thrust upon him by Matilde, and he did not feel that he could face another scene with her yet. When he found himself near the Palazzo Macomer, he turned back, walking slowly, and went towards the sea, till he came to the vast Piazza San Ferdinando, beyond San Carlo. He went into a café and sat down in a corner to drink a cup of chocolate by way of luncheon. The seat he had chosen was at the end of one of the long red velvet divans close to a big window looking upon the square. There were little marble tables in a row, and at the one before that which Bosio chose, a priest was seated, reading, with an empty cup before him. He was evidently near-sighted, for he held his newspaper so near his eyes that Bosio could not have seen his face even had he thought of looking at it. The priest had thrown back his heavy black cloak after he had sat down, so that it fell in wide folds upon the seat, on each side of him. His hands, which held up the paper, while he seemed to be searching for something in the columns, were thin to emaciation, almost transparent, and very carefully kept, — a fact which might have argued that he was not an ordinary, hardworking parish priest of the people, even if his presence in a fashionable café had not of itself made that seem improbable. On the other hand, he wore heavy, coarse shoes; his clothes, though well brushed, were visibly threadbare, and his

clean white stock was frayed at the edge and almost worn out. He had taken off his three-cornered hat, and his high peaked head was barely covered with scanty silver-grey hair. When he dropped his paper and looked about him for the waiter, evidently wishing to pay for his coffee, he showed a face sufficiently remarkable to deserve description. The prominent feature was the enormous, beak-like nose — the nose of the fanatic which is not to be mistaken amongst thousands, with its high, arching bridge, its wide, sensitive nostrils, and its preternaturally sharp, down-turning point. But the rest of the priest's face was not in keeping with what was most striking in it. The forehead was not powerful, narrow, prominent — but rather, broad and imaginative. The chin was round and not enough developed; the clean-shaven lips had a singularly gentle expression, and the very near-sighted blue eyes were not set deeply enough to give strength to the look. The priest carried his head somewhat bent and forward, in a sort of deprecating way, which made his long nose seem longer, and his short chin more retreating. The skull was unusually high and peaked at the point where phrenologists place the organ of veneration. The man himself was tall and exceedingly thin, and looked as though he fasted too often and too long. He was certainly a very ugly man, judged according to the standards of human beauty; and

yet there was about him an air of kindness and sincerity which had in it something almost saintly, together with a very unmistakable individual identity. He was one of those men whom one can neither forget nor mistake when one has met them once. Bosio did not notice him, being much absorbed by his own thoughts. The waiter came to ask what he wished, and was stopped on his way back by the priest, who desired to pay for what he had taken. But Bosio had turned to the window again, and sat looking out and watching the people in the broad semicircular Piazza.

The priest, having paid his little score, carefully folded his newspaper and put it into the wide pocket of his cassock. Then he gathered up the collar of his big cloak behind him, as he sat, and began to edge his way out from behind the little marble table. But the long folds had fallen far on each side — so far that Bosio had unawares sat down upon the cloth, and as the priest tried to get out, he felt the cloak being dragged from under him. The priest stopped and turned, just as Bosio rose with an apology on his lips, which became an exclamation of surprise, as he began to speak.

"Don Teodoro!" he cried. "You were next to me, and I did not see you!"

The priest's eyelids contracted to help his imperfect sight, and he smiled as he moved nearer to Bosio.

"Bosio!" he exclaimed, when he had recognized

him. "I am almost blind, but I was sure I knew your voice."

"You are in Naples, and you have not let me know it?" said Bosio, reproachfully and interrogatively.

"I have not been in Naples two hours, and have just left my bag at my usual quarters with Don Matteo. Then I came here to get a cup of coffee, and now I was going to you. Besides, it is the tenth of December. You know that I always come on the tenth every year, and stay until the twentieth, in order to be back in Muro four days before Christmas. But I am glad I have met you here, for I should have missed you at the Palazzo."

"Yes," said Bosio, "I am glad that we have met. Sit with me, now, while I drink a cup of chocolate. Then we will do whatever you wish." He sat down again. "I am glad you have come, Don Teodoro," he added thoughtfully. "I am very glad you have come."

Don Teodoro produced a pair of silver spectacles as he reseated himself, and proceeded to settle them very carefully on his enormous nose. Then he turned to Bosio, and looked at him.

"Have you been ill?" he asked, after a careful scrutiny of the pallid, nervous face.

"No." Bosio looked out of the window, avoiding the other's gaze. "I am nervous to-day. I slept badly; and I have been walking, and have not breakfasted. Oh! no — I am not ill. I am

never ill. I have excellent health. And you?" He turned to his companion again. "How are you? Always the same?"

"Always the same," answered the priest. "I grow old, that is the only change. After all, it is not a bad one, since we must change in some way. It is better than growing young — better than growing young again," he repeated, shaking his head sadly. "Since the payment must be made, it is better that the day of reckoning should come nearer, year by year."

"For me it has come," said Bosio, in a low voice, and his chin sank upon his breast, as he leaned back, clasping his hands before him on the edge of the marble table. The priest looked at him anxiously and in silence. The two would certainly have met later in the day, or on the morrow, and the accident of their meeting at the café had only brought them together a few hours earlier. For the hard-working country parish priest came yearly to Naples for a few days before Christmas, as he had said, and the first visit he made, after depositing his slender luggage at the house of the ecclesiastic with whom he always stopped, was to Bosio Macomer, his old pupil.

In his loneliness, that morning, Bosio had thought of Don Teodoro and had wished to see him. It had occurred vaguely to him that the priest generally made a visit to the city about that time of the

year, but he had never realized that Don Teodoro always arrived on the same day, the tenth of December, and had done so unfailingly for many years past.

Before he had been curate of the distant village of Muro, which belonged to the Serra family, Don Teodoro had been tutor to Bosio Macomer. He had lived in Naples as a priest at large, a student, and in those days, to some extent, a man of the world. When Bosio was grown up, his tutor had remained his friend — the only really intimate friend he had in the world, and a true and devoted one. It was perhaps because he was too much attached to Bosio that Matilde Macomer had induced him at last to accept the parish in the mountains with the chaplaincy of the ancestral castle of the Serra, — an office which was a total sinecure, as the family had rarely gone thither to spend a few weeks, even in the days of the late prince. Matilde hated the place for its appalling gloominess and wild scenery, and Veronica, to whom it now belonged, had never seen it at all. It had the reputation of being haunted by all manner of ghosts and goblins, and during the first ten years following the Italian annexation of Naples, the surrounding mountains had been infested by outlaws and brigands. But Don Teodoro, as curate and chaplain, received a considerable stipend which enabled him to procure for himself books at his pleasure, when he could bring himself

to curtail the daily and yearly charities in which he spent almost all he received.

He was, indeed, a man torn between two inclinations which almost amounted to passions, — charity and the love of learning, — and their action was so evenly balanced that it was a real pain to him either to deny himself the book he coveted, or to forfeit the pleasure of giving the money it would cost to the poor. He had sometimes kept the last note he had left at the end of the month for many days, quite unable to decide whether he should send it to Naples for a new volume, or buy clothes with it for some half-clad child. So sincere was he in both longings, that after he had disposed of the money in one way or the other, he almost invariably had an acute fit of self-reproach. His common sense alone told him that when he had given away nine-tenths of all he received, he had the right to spend the other tenth upon such food for his mind as was almost more indispensable to him than bread. But, besides this, he had been engaged for twenty years upon a history of the Church, in compiling which he believed he was doing a work of the highest importance to mankind; so that it appeared to him a duty to expend, from time to time, a certain amount of money in order to procure such books, old and new, as were necessary for his studies. As a matter of fact, the seasons themselves decided his conduct in these difficulties; for

in cold weather, or times of scarcity, his charity outran his desire for books; whereas, in the warm weather, and when there was plenty, and no pitiful starved faces gathered about his door, he bought books, instead of searching for the few who were still in need.

In his youth, Don Teodoro had travelled much. He had accompanied a mission to Africa at the beginning of his life, and had afterwards wandered about Europe, being at that time, as yet, more studious than charitable, and possessed of a small independence left him by his father, who had been an officer in the Neapolitan army in the old days. He had seen many things and known many men of many nations, before he had at last settled in Muro, in the little priest's house, under the shadow of the dismal castle, and close to the church. There he lived now, all the year round, excepting the ten days which he annually spent in Naples. The little house was full of books, and there was a big, old shaky press, containing his manuscripts, the work of his whole life. He had neither friends nor companions of his own class, but he was beloved by all the people. Playing on his name, Teodoro, in their dialect, they called him, 'O prevete d'oro'—'the priest of gold.' And many said that he had performed miracles, when he had fasted in Lent.

This was practically Bosio Macomer's only inti-

mate friend. For although the intimacy had been interrupted for years, by circumstances, it had never been checked by any action or word of either. It is true that neither was, as a rule, in need of friendship, nor desirous of cultivating it. Learning and charity absorbed the priest's whole life. Bosio's existence, of which Don Teodoro knew in reality nothing, had moved in the vicious circle of a single passion, which he could never acknowledge, and which excluded, for common caution's sake, anything like intimacy with other men. But Bosio had not ceased to look upon the priest as the best man he had ever known, and in spite of his own errings, he was still quite able to appreciate goodness in others; and Don Teodoro had always remembered his pupil as one of the few men to whom he had been accustomed to speak freely of his hopes, and sympathies, and aspirations, feeling sure of appreciation from a nature at once refined and reticent, though itself hard to understand. For Don Teodoro was, strange to say, painfully sensitive to ridicule, though in all other respects a singularly brave man, morally and physically. As a child or as a boy, he had been laughed at by his companions for his extraordinary nose and his short sight; and he had never recovered from the childish suffering thus inflicted upon him by thoughtless children. The fear of being ridiculous had largely influenced him through life, and

had really contributed much towards deciding him to accept the cure of the wild mountain town.

Bosio's almost solemn words, as his chin fell upon his breast, and he clasped his hands before him, suddenly recalled to the priest the years they had spent together, the confidence there had been between them, the interest he had once felt in Bosio's fortune, — as an object once daily familiar, and fresh once and not without beauty, then long hidden for years, and coming suddenly to sight again, moth-eaten, dusty, and all but destroyed, is oddly painful to him who used it long ago, and then sees it when it is fit only to be thrown away.

"You are suffering," said Don Teodoro, leaning forward upon the marble table and peering through his silver-rimmed spectacles into Bosio's pale face, and gentle, exhausted eyes.

The priest's nervous, emaciated hand softly pressed the sleeve of the younger man's coat, and the fantastic features grew wonderfully gentle and kind. It was the transformation that came over them whenever any one was visibly poor, or starving, or sorrowing, or hurt, — the change which a beautiful passion brings to the ugliest face in the world.

Bosio smiled faintly as he saw it, and a little hope was breathed into his heart, as though somewhere, at some immeasurable distance, there might

be a possibility of salvation from the ruin and wreck of his horrible life.

"Yes," he said. "I am suffering. It is a great suffering. I do not think that I can live much longer."

"Can I do nothing?" asked Don Teodoro.

Bosio still smiled, as a man smiles in torture when one speaks to him of peace.

"If I believed that anything could be done," he said, "I should not suffer as I do. I have lived a bad life, and the time has come when I must pay the score. But it is not my fault if things are as they are — it is not all my fault."

The priest sighed, and looked away after a moment.

"We have all done some one great wrong thing in our lives," he said gently. "The price may perhaps be paid to God in good, as well as to man in pain."

CHAPTER VI.

Bosio shook his head, and a long silence followed. Once or twice he roused himself, stirred the cup of chocolate which the waiter had set before him, and sipped a teaspoonful of it absently. The corner where the two men sat together was quiet, but from the front of the café came the continual clatter of plates and glasses, the echo of feet, and the ring of voices; for it was just midday, and the place was full of its habitual frequenters.

"If we were in church," said Bosio at last, "and if you were in a confessional —"

He stopped, and glanced at his companion without completing the sentence.

"You would make a confession? There are churches near," said Don Teodoro. "I am ready. Will you come?"

Bosio hesitated.

"No," he said at last. "I could tell you nothing without betraying others."

"Betraying! Is it a crime that you have on your conscience?" The priest's voice was low and troubled.

"Many crimes," answered Bosio. "The crimes

that must come, and that I cannot prevent by living, nor hinder by dying."

Again there was silence during several minutes.

"You may trust me as a friend, even if, as a priest, you could not confess all the circumstances to me," said Don Teodoro, after the long pause. "I do not wish you to make confidences to me, unless you are impelled to do so. But you are in that frame of mind, my dear Bosio, in which a man will sooner or later unburden himself to some one. You might do worse than choose me. I am your friend, I am old, and I know that I am discreet. I am extraordinarily discreet. It may seem strange that I should say so myself, but my own life has taught me that I am to be trusted with secrets."

"Yes," replied Bosio. "You must have heard strange things sometimes under the seal of confession."

"I have known of strange things." Don Teodoro's face grew sad and thoughtful, and Bosio, seeing it, suddenly made up his mind.

He leaned far back against the painted wall for a moment, with half-closed eyes. Then he drew nearer to his friend, so that he spoke close to the latter's ear, though he looked down at the table before him. His nervous fingers played with the teaspoon in the saucer of his cup.

It was a strange confession, there in the corner of the crowded café at midday, and those who

glanced idly at the two men from a distance would hardly have guessed that an act in a mysterious life was before their eyes — an act which was itself but a verbal recapitulation of many actions past, but which to the speaker had an enormous importance of its own, and an influence on the future of all concerned.

Not much had been needed to break through the barrier of Bosio's reticence. Walking through the streets that morning he had for a moment even thought of telling some of his story to Taquisara. It was far easier to tell it to the only true friend he had in the world, to one in whom he had confided as a boy and had trusted as a young man. He told almost all. He confessed that his love of many years had been his brother's wife, and though he spoke no word of her love for him, the old priest knew the evil truth from the man's tone and look. For the rest he spared neither Matilde nor any one else, but told Don Teodoro all the truth, and all his anxious fears for Veronica's safety, if he should not marry her, with all his horror of his own shame if he should yield to the pressure brought upon him.

Don Teodoro's expression changed more than once while he listened, but he never turned his head nor moved in his seat.

"You see what I am," said Bosio, at last. "You see what my people are. Indeed, I need a confes-

sor, if one could save my soul; but I need a friend even more, for through me that poor girl is in danger of her life. That is her choice — to die or to be my wife. Mine is, to see her murdered or to do an unutterably shameful thing — or to see the woman I love driven out of the world with infamy for the crimes she has not committed, and the fear of that disgrace is making her mad. It is for her, and for Veronica! What do I care about myself? What have I left to care for? What I have done, I have done. I am not good, I am not religious, I am perhaps a worse sinner than most men, and a poorer believer than many. But I will not be the instrument of these deeds — and yet, if I refuse — there is death, or shame, or both, to those I love! At least I have spoken, and you will not betray me. It has been a relief, a moment's respite from torture. I thank you for it, my friend, and I wish I could repay you. You cannot give me advice, for I have twisted and turned it all in fifty ways, and there is no escape. You cannot help me, for no one can. But you have done me some little momentary good, just by sitting there and hearing my story. Beyond that there is nothing to be done."

The wretched man closed his eyes, and again leaned back against the bright red wall, which threw his white face and dark-ringed eyes into strong and painful relief. Don Teodoro was silent, bending his mind upon the hideous problem.

Bosio misunderstood him and spoke again without moving.

"I know," he said. "You need not speak. I know by heart all the reproaches I deserve, and I know that no human being, much less a holy man like yourself, could possibly feel anything but horror at all this —"

"I am very far from being a holy man," interrupted the priest. "If I feel horror, it is for what has been, and may be, but not for you. Bosio —" he hesitated a moment. "Will you come with me to Muro, and leave all this?" he asked suddenly. "Will you come out of the world for a while? No —I am not proposing to you to make a religious retreat. I wish I could. I know the world, and you, and your people, for I lived long among you, and I know that one cannot change one's soul, as one changes one's coat — nor enter upon a retreat as one springs into the sea for a bath in hot weather. What you have made yourself, you are. Heaven itself would need time to unmake you. I speak just as one man to another. Come with me to the mountains for a week, a month — as long as you will. It is dreary and cold, and you will have to eat what you can get; but you will have peace, for nobody will come up there to disturb you. Meanwhile, something may happen. You are overwrought by all you have seen and heard and felt. Whatever the countess may have said, Donna

Veronica is quite safe. My dear Bosio, people in your rank of life do not murder one another for money nowadays. It is laughable; the mere idea of it—"

"Laughable!" Bosio turned and looked at him. "If you had seen her eyes, you would find it hard to laugh, I think. Such things happen rarely, perhaps, but they happen sometimes."

Don Teodoro was not persuaded. He thought that Bosio, in his excited state, very much overestimated the danger.

"At all events," he said, "nothing will happen, so long as there is the possibility that you may marry her. If you come with me, you will at least have time to think before acting. But here, you may be forced to act before you have been able to think."

But Bosio shook his head slowly.

"There are difficulties which can be helped by putting them off," he answered. "This is not one. You forget that in just three weeks my brother will be ruined — absolutely ruined — if he cannot pay. If I stayed that time with you, I should come back to find him a beggar — or obliged to throw himself upon Veronica's mercy and charity for his daily bread and for a roof to cover him."

"There is one other way," said the priest, thoughtfully. "There is one thing left for you to do, if you have courage to do it. And you know better

than I what chance there would be of success. It is what I should do myself. It is a heroic remedy, but it may save everything yet."

Bosio's eyes turned anxiously to his friend, by way of question.

"Find Veronica alone," said Don Teodoro. "Take all rights into your own hands and tell her everything, just as you have told me. You know her well. If she is kind-hearted, as I think she is, she will pay your brother's debts, take over the estates herself, since it is time, and manage that Cardinal Campodonico shall never suspect that there has been anything wrong with the administration. If she is not so charitable as to do that of her own free will, why then, since you believe it, tell her that she must do it to save her life. It is most unlikely that she will refuse and take refuge with the cardinal in order to bring public disgrace upon her father's sister. And even that, horrible as it seems to you — if it must be, it will be, and it will not be your fault —"

"But Matilde —" Bosio began in troubled tones. "And yet, perhaps, it is possible. Veronica would not be so cruel as to ruin them — the money is nothing to her. And, after all, she will hardly feel the loss out of her immense fortune. Yes —" his face brightened slowly with the rays of hope. "Yes — it may be possible, after all. I had thought of going to her, but not of telling her the whole

truth. It did not seem as though I could, until I had heard myself tell it to you. It will be hard, but it seems possible, and it will save her — and then — "

His face changed again, as he broke off in the sentence, and his melancholy eyes turned slowly to his friend.

"And then," said Don Teodoro, "perhaps you will go back with me to Muro, and rest and forget it all."

"Yes," answered Bosio, sadly and dreamily, "perhaps I shall go to Muro with you. I wonder," he continued, after a short pause, "that you should want such a man as I am in your priest's house there."

"Oh! I am glad of a little society when I can get it, and I have much to show you which might interest you. I have worked perpetually for many years, since we used to talk about my history of the Church."

He checked himself. In spite of all he had just heard, and the real distress and sympathy he had felt for Bosio, the one of his dominant passions which was uppermost just then had almost made him forget everything, and launch into an account of his work and studies. Men who, intellectually, are deeply engrossed in one matter, and who, socially, have long lived very lonely lives, are not generally able to lose themselves in sympathy

for others. As Bosio was not exactly an object for Don Teodoro's charity, he was in some danger of being made a listener for the outpouring of the priest's tremendous intellectual enthusiasm. But the latter checked himself. The things he had heard were indeed of a nature not so easily forgotten. He went back to them at once.

"My dear Bosio," he began again, "do not put yourself down as the worst of men. It is just as bad to go too far in one direction as in the other. There is undoubtedly, in theory, the man in the world, at any given moment, who must be a little worse than any other living man; but though he might be our next-door neighbour, we have no means whatever of knowing that he is the greatest sinner alive, because we do not know all about all existing sinners. Consequently, and for the same reason, no man has any right to assume that he is worst of men. And as far as that goes, many men have done worse things, even in the religious view, than you have done, and very much worse things, in the opinion of society. You are not responsible for all that the others have done. You are only responsible in the immediate future for your share of duty, in doing the wisest and best thing which may present itself. And if you can induce Donna Veronica to forgive your brother and your brother's wife, by telling her the truth without prevarication, you will have done something to atone for the

past evil which you cannot undo. I am not preaching to you, my dear friend. Pray look upon me as a man and not as a priest. Indeed, I would rather that you should never think of me as a priest at all. If you need spiritual help, there are many better men than I, who can give it to you. But as a man and a friend, come to me if you will. You are to me also a man and a friend, and not a penitent."

He finished speaking, took off his spectacles, and rested his head against the wall behind him, as Bosio had done, and the younger man glanced sideways at his friend's extraordinary profile. Its fantastic outline had a moral effect upon him; for it recalled, as nothing else could, the early days of his life before he had been what he now was, when he had known what hope meant, and had understood aspirations in others which had no meaning for him now. He was very grateful, too, for Don Teodoro's words, which certainly comforted him in a way he had not expected.

"Thank you," he said, "I will think of it. I think I shall take your advice and speak to Veronica. She can save us all, if she will."

"Yes," said Don Teodoro. "She can save you all — and she will."

Then they sat a long time in silence in their corner, and the priest's mind wandered occasionally to the thought of his manuscript, and of the many

points he intended to discuss with his friend Don Matteo, a man as learned as himself, but indolent instead of active, one of those passive, living treasuries of thought upon which the active worker fastens greedily when he has a chance, to extract all the riches he can in the shortest possible time, in any shape, to carry the gold away with him to his workshop and fashion it to his wish.

And Bosio, whose intelligence was essentially dramatic and given to throwing future interviews into an imaginary dramatic shape, thought over and over what he would say to Veronica and what she might be expected to say to him. But he was terribly exhausted and harassed, and by degrees as the stimulant of recent comfort lost its cheering warmth within him, he silently grew despondent again within himself, and his dramatic fancies of fear became near and tragic realities. He thought he could hear the clear, bell-like voice of the somnambulist telling him that he should be forced to marry Veronica.

At last, realizing that he was probably detaining Don Teodoro, he roused himself, and the two went out together into the broad light of the Piazza San Ferdinando.

"I will go home," Bosio said. "I will think of it all. At this time I can easily be alone with Veronica."

His voice sounded as though he were speaking to

himself, and his head was bent, so that he stooped from the neck as Don Teodoro did. But the latter, as he walked, his silver-rimmed spectacles balanced on his great nose, thrust his bent head more forward. Or rather, it was as though his head moved first in the direction he meant to follow, while his thin legs had difficulty in keeping up with it.

Bosio was willing to put off the moment of going home as long as possible, and he accompanied his friend to the door of Don Matteo's lodging, which was in a clean, quiet, sunlit street, behind the Piazza — in one of those oases of light and cleanliness upon which one sometimes comes in the heart of Naples. The little green door was reached by a couple of steps up from the level of the street. Don Teodoro had a key and stood on the upper step, holding it in his hand and blinking in the warm sunshine.

"You know this house," he said. "You have been to see me here once or twice. If you want me, you can always send for me in the afternoon, for I only go out in the morning. But I will come and see you. When? To-morrow, before noon?"

"Yes," Bosio answered. "By to-morrow at midday something will be decided."

They shook hands and parted, Bosio turning eastward in the direction of his home. The priest absently tried to insert the key in the lock of the door, while his eyes followed his friend to the

corner of the street. Then, as Bosio's still graceful figure disappeared, he turned from the keyhole with a sigh, and let himself in.

Bosio walked rapidly at first, and then more slowly as he came nearer to the old quarter in which the Palazzo Macomer was situated. As with all men of such character, his irresolution increased just when he fancied that he was about to do something decisive. He would not have hesitated in the same way, if he had been called upon to face a physical danger; for though he was certainly no hero, he was by no means a physical coward, and in a quarrel he would have stood up bravely enough to face his antagonist. But this was very different. He had been ruled by Matilde Macomer through many years, and when he thought of meeting her he had a deadly presentiment of assured defeat. She would extract from him something more than the silent assent which he had been forced into giving on the previous evening, and she could not let him go till he promised to marry Veronica. He walked more slowly, as he felt the fear and uncertainty twisting his scant courage from his heart.

Then he was ashamed of himself, and in a sudden attempt to be brave he hailed a passing cab and drove rapidly to the Palazzo Macomer. He asked for Veronica and was told that she was in her room. He did not wish to send her a message. Gregorio

had gone out immediately after the midday breakfast. Bosio was glad of that. He had not seen his brother since the previous evening, and he did not wish to see him alone. There were monstrous wrongs on both sides, and it was better to pretend mutual ignorance, and keep up the ghastly farce, pretending that nothing was the matter. The very smallest incautious word would crack the swaying bubble that was blown to bursting with hell's breath.

Bosio had entered the main apartments in order to inquire for Veronica, had passed through the long outer hall with its red walls, its matted floor and its great table covered with green baize, to the antechamber within, where, with some ostentation, as Bosio had always thought, Gregorio had hung up the escutcheon with the quartered arms of Macomer and Serra, flanked by half a dozen big old family portraits on either side, opposite the three windows. He had waited there until the footman returned after looking for Veronica in the drawing-room, and when he heard that she was not there, he turned to reach the staircase again and go up to his own bachelor's quarters, for he feared to meet Matilde and hoped to put off seeing her until dinner-time, when he might so manœuvre as not to be left alone with her.

But the footman had hardly delivered his answer, and Bosio was in the act of turning, when one of

134

the two masked doors under the pictures opened suddenly, and Matilde spoke into the room, calling him by name. He turned pale and stopped short, as though a cold hand had taken him by the throat. The footman went out to the hall, as Bosio met Matilde's eyes.

"Come," she said briefly, "I want to speak to you."

He obeyed silently, and followed her through the narrow door and through a passage beyond, to her own morning-room. Matilde shut the door. The afternoon sun streamed in through two high windows, filling every corner with light and turning the crimson carpet blood red, where Matilde stood, all round her feet and the folds of her loose dark gown, so that she seemed to rise out of a pool of vivid colour, a dark, strong figure with the brightness all behind her and the gleam of her eyes just lightening in the shadow of her face.

"Why did you go out without seeing me this morning?" she asked in a hard tone. "And why did Taquisara come to see you early? You scarcely know him —"

"I certainly did not send for him," said Bosio, uneasily.

"He did not come for nothing," retorted Matilde. "He is no friend of yours. He must have come for some particular reason."

Bosio said nothing, but turned from her and

moved towards a table covered with books. In an objectless way he opened a volume and looked at the title page. Matilde followed him with her eyes.

"Well?" she said presently, "I am waiting. What did Taquisara have to say? He is Gianluca's friend — he came with a message. That is clear. What did he say? I am waiting to hear."

"He came because he chose to come," answered Bosio, still looking at the title page of the book. "Gianluca did not send him. He wished to know whether it were true that I was to marry Veronica."

"I thought so. And what did you answer? Of course you told him that it was quite settled."

"We had a long conversation — I do not remember all that we said — "

"You do not remember whether you told him that you were to marry Veronica or not?" Matilde laughed angrily and came forward.

"Let that book alone!" she said imperiously. "Look at me — so — now tell me the truth!"

She laid her hand upon his arm, and not gently, and she made him turn to her. Bosio felt that shock of shame which smites a man in the back, as it were, when a woman is too strong for him and orders him brutally to do her will.

"I told him the truth," he answered, and his pale cheeks reddened with futile anger.

"The truth!" Matilde's face darkened. "What? What did you tell him?"

Bosio was weakly glad to have frightened her a little.

"The truth," he said, trying to assume a certain indifference. "Just that. I let him understand that nothing is definitely settled yet, and that there is no contract —"

Matilde was silent, and her eyes seemed to draw nearer together, while the smooth red lips curled scornfully.

"Oh, what a coward you are!" she cried in a low voice, in deep disgust, and as she spoke she dropped his arm in contempt, though she still held his face with her angry gaze.

"You have no right to call me a coward," answered Bosio, defending his manhood. "I told you that I could not do it. The man put it in such a way that I had to give him a definite answer. For your sake I would not deny the engagement altogether —"

"For my sake!" exclaimed Matilde. "Do not use such phrases to me. They mean nothing. For some wretched quibble of your miserable conscience — as you still have the assumption to call it — you will ruin us in another day."

"Yes, I still have some conscience," replied Bosio, trying to be bold under her scornful eyes. "I would not let Taquisara think that you and Gregorio had lied, and I would not lie myself —"

"You are reforming, then? You choose the moment well!"

"I have told you what passed between Taquisara and me," said Bosio. "That was what you wished to know. I will judge of myself whether I did right or not."

He turned from her and walked away, towards the door.

"Well?" she said, not moving, for she knew that her voice would stop him.

"Is there anything else?" he asked, turning again and standing still.

"There is much more. Come back! Sit down and talk to me like a sensible being. There is much to be said. The matter is all but settled in spite of the account which Taquisara frightened you into giving him. I like that man, he is so brave! He is not at all like you."

"If you wish me to stay longer, you must not insult me again," said Bosio, not yet seating himself, but resting his hands on the back of a chair as he stood. "You know very well that I am no more a coward, if it comes to fighting men, than others are. One need not be cowardly to dread doing such a thing as you are trying to force me to."

"It does not seem such a very terrible thing," said Matilde, her tone suddenly changing and growing thoughtful. "It really does not seem to me such a dreadful thing that you should be Ve-

ronica's husband. Of course I do not speak of the material advantages. You were always an idealist, Bosio — you do not care for those things, and I daresay that when you are married you will not even care to take her titles, nor to spend much of her money. I know well enough what passes in your mind. Sit down. Let us talk about it. We cannot afford to quarrel, you and I, can we? I am sorry I spoke as I did — and I never meant that you were cowardly in the ordinary sense. I was angry about Taquisara. What right had he to come here, to pry into our affairs? I should think you would have resented it, too."

"I did," said Bosio, somewhat sullenly. "But I could not turn him out, nor get into a quarrel with him. It would have made a useless scandal and would have set every one talking."

"Certainly," assented Matilde. "Perhaps you did right, after all — at least, you thought you did. I am sure of that. I do not know why I was so angry at you. I am unstrung, and nervous, I suppose. Did I say very dreadful things to you, dear? I do not know what I said — "

"You called me a coward several times," replied Bosio, thinking to show a little strength by relenting slowly.

"Oh! but I did not mean it!" cried the countess. "Bosio, forgive me. I did not mean to say such things — indeed, I did not. But do you

wonder that I am nervous? [illegible] me —"

"Of course I forgive you," answered Bosio, raising his eyebrows rather wearily. "I know that you are under a terrible strain — but you say things sometimes which are unjust and hard. I know what all this means to us both — but there must be some other way."

Matilde shook her head mournfully, as Bosio sat down beside her, already sinking back to his long-learned docility.

"There is no other way," she said. "There is certainly none, that is sure. I have thought it all over, as one thinks of everything when everything is in danger. The only other course is to throw ourselves upon Veronica's mercy —"

"Well? Why not?" asked Bosio, eagerly, as Don Teodoro's advice gained instant plausibility again. "She is kind, she is charitable, she will forgive everything and save you —"

"The shame of it, Bosio! Of confessing it all —and she may refuse. Veronica is not all kindness and charity. She is a Serra, as I am, and though she is a mere girl, if she takes it into her head to be hard and unforgiving, there would be no power on earth that could move her. She is not so unlike me, Bosio. You may think so because she is so unlike me in looks. She has the type of her father, poor Tommaso. But we Serra

are all Serra — there is not much difference. No — do not interrupt me, dear. And as for your marriage, there is much to be said for it. It is time that you were married, you know. You and I have lived our lives, and we are not what we were. I shall always be fond of you — we shall always be more than friends — but always less than what we have been. It must have come sooner or later, Bosio, and it may as well come now. You know — we cannot be always young. And as for me, if I am not already old, I soon shall be."

The woman who had held him so long knew how to tempt him, sacrificing everything in the desperate straits to which she was reduced. Though he had loved her well, and sinfully, but truly, for so many years, his love had sometimes seemed an unbearable thraldom, to escape from which he would have given his heart piecemeal, though he should lose all the happiness life held for him, for the sake of a momentary freedom. Possibly, too, she knew that he never longed for that freedom so much as when she had just been most violent and despotic. She was prepared for the feeble dissent with which he answered her suggestion of separation. He would be the more easily persuaded to yield and marry Veronica.

"As for your being old," he said, "it is absurd. It is I who have grown old of late. But our being friends —" he paused thoughtfully.

"A man is never too old to marry," answered Matilde. "It is only women who grow too old to be loved. You will begin your life all over again with Veronica. You and she will go away together — you can live in Rome, when you are tired of Paris. It will be better. You and I will see each other seldom at first. By and by it will be so easy for us to be good friends after we have been separated some time."

"Friends?" Bosio spoke the one word again, with a sad and dreamy intonation.

"I asked Veronica this morning," continued Matilde, not heeding him, and beginning to speak more rapidly. "You have no idea how very fond she is of you. When I spoke of the marriage, she seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world. She found arguments for it herself."

"She?"

"Yes. She said — what I have said to you — that there was no man whom she knew so well and liked so much as you, that of course she had never thought of marrying you, nor, indeed, of being married at all, but that, at the same time, she should think that you would make a very good husband. She wished to think of it — that is as much as to say that she will not even make any serious objections. You have no idea how young girls feel about marriage, Bosio. How should you? You cannot comprehend the horror a girl

like Veronica feels of a stranger, of a man like Gianluca, even, whom she has met half a dozen times and talked with. It seems so dreadful to think of spending a lifetime with a man about whom she knows nothing, or next to nothing. And yet it is the custom, and most of them accept it and are happy. But the idea of marrying some one with whom she is really intimate, whom she really likes, who really understands her, places marriage in a new light for a young girl. Without knowing it, Veronica is half in love with you. It is no wonder that she likes the thought of being your wife — apart from the fact that you are a very desirable husband."

"I cannot believe that," said Bosio.

"That you are desirable as a husband? My dear Bosio, do not pretend to be so absurdly modest! Any woman would be glad to marry you. But for me, you could have made the best match in Naples years ago —"

"Not even years ago. Much less now. But that was not what I meant. I cannot believe that Veronica is really inclined to marry me. It seems to me that she might be my daughter —"

"If you had been married at fifteen," suggested Matilde, laughing softly. "Because you feel tired and harassed to-day, you feel a hundred years old. It is no compliment to me to say so, for I am even a little older than you, I think. And you — you

are young, you are handsome, you are talented, you have the manners that women love —"

"It is not many minutes since you were saying that we were both growing old —"

"No, no! I said that we could not always be young. That is very different. And that we have lived our lives — our lives so long as they can be lived together — that is what I meant. You are young! How many men marry at fifty! And you are not forty yet. You have ten years of youth before you. That is not the question. So far as that is concerned, say that you are old to-night, at dinner, and you shall see how Veronica will laugh at you! But that you and I should part, Bosio — and yet, it is far better, if you have the courage."

"Have you?" he asked sadly.

"Yes — I have, for your sake, since I see how you look at this. And you are right. I know you are, though I am only a woman, and cannot have a man's ideas about honour. For my own part — well, I am a woman, and I have loved you long. But you are the one to be thought of. You shall be free, as though I had never lived. You shall be able to say to yourself that in marrying Veronica you are not doing anything in the least dishonourable. I shall not exist for you. I shall not feel that I have the right to think of you and for you as I always have. I shall never ask you to do anything for me, lest you should feel that I were

asserting some claim to you, as though you were still mine. It will be hard at first. But I can do it, and I will do it, in order that your conscience may be free. You shall marry her, as though you had never known me, and hereafter I will always be the same. Only — " She fixed her eyes upon him with a look which, whether genuine or assumed, was fierce and tender —

"Only — if you are not true to her, Bosio — if you leave her and go after some other woman — then I will turn upon you!"

Bosio met her glance with a look of something like astonishment, wondering how in a few sentences she had got herself into a position to threaten him with vengeance if he were unfaithful to Veronica.

"We will not speak of that," she exclaimed before he said anything in answer or protest. "We have harder things to do than to imagine evil in the future. Since we are decided — since it is to be the end — let it be now, quickly! You shall not have it on your mind that you belong to me in any way, from now. No — you are right — you must feel free. You must feel free, besides really being free. You must feel, when you speak to Veronica to-night or to-morrow, as she expects you to speak, that all our life together is utterly past and swept away, and that I only exist henceforth as a relative — as — as your wife's aunt, Bosio!"

She laughed, half-bitterly, half-nervously, at the idea, and turning away her face she held out her hand to him.

He took it, and held it, pressing it between both his own.

"Do you mean this, Matilde?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes, I mean it," she answered, speaking away from him with averted face.

He could not see, but she was biting her lip till it almost bled. In her own strange way she loved him with all her evil nature, and if she were breaking with him now, it was to save herself from something worse than death. It was the hardest thing she had ever done. He hesitated: there was the mean prompting of the spirit, to take her at her word and to set himself free, since she offered him freedom, caring not whether she might repent to-morrow; and there was the instinct of fidelity which in so much dishonour had remained with him through so many years.

"Besides," she said hoarsely, "I do not love you any more. I would not keep you longer, if I could. Oh — we shall be friends! But the other — no! Good bye, Bosio — good bye."

Something moved him, as she had not meant that anything should.

"I do not believe you," he said. "You love me still — I will not leave you!"

"No, no! I do not — but if you still care at all, save me. Say good bye, but do the rest also. You are free now. You are an honourable man again. Bosio, look at my hair. You used to love it. Would you have it cut off and cropped by the convict's shears? My hands that you are holding — dear — would you love them galled by the irons, riveted upon them for years? Save me, Bosio! You are free now — save me, for the dear sake of all that has been!"

Still she turned her face away, and as Bosio saw the waving richness of her brown hair and heard her words, he felt a desperate thrust of pain in his heart. It was all so fearfully true and possible.

"But do not say that you do not love me," he pleaded, in low tones, bending to her ear.

There was a moment's silence, and he thought he saw a convulsive movement of her throat — he guessed it rather than saw it.

"It is true!" she cried, with an effort, drawing her hands from him and turning her pale face fiercely. "If I loved you still, do you think I would give you to Veronica Serra, or to any living woman? Was that the way I loved you? Was that how you loved me?"

"Ah no! But now —"

She would not let him speak.

"Do you think that if I loved you, as I have loved you — as I did once — I should be so ready

to give you up? Do you know me so little? Do you think that I have no pride?" asked Matilde Macomer, holding him at arm's length from her with her strong hands and throwing back her head, while the lids half veiled her eyes, and her face grew paler still.

The words that were so strange, spoken by such a woman, fell from her lips with force and earnest conviction, whether she truly believed that they had meaning for her, or not. Then her voice changed and softened again.

"But your friend — yes, always, as you must be mine — that and nothing more. We have said good bye to all the rest — now go, for I would rather be alone for a little while. Go, Bosio — please go!"

"As you will," he answered.

Then he kissed her hand and looked into her face for a moment, as though expecting that she should speak again. But she only shook her head, and her hand gave his no pressure. He kissed it again. There were tears in his eyes when he left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Love is not the privilege of the virtuous, nor the exclusive right of the weak man and woman. The earth brings forth the good thing and the bad thing with equal strength to grow great and multiply side by side, and it is not the privilege of the good thing to live forever because it is good, nor is it the condemnation of the bad to die before its time, perishing in its own evil.

A moment after Bosio had left the room, Matilde rose to her feet, very pale and unsteady, and locked the door. Then, as though she were groping her way in darkness, she got back to the sofa, and falling upon it, buried her face in the cushions, and bit them, lest she should cry out. She felt that it would have been easier, after all, to have killed Veronica Serra, than it had been to part with the one thing she had loved in her life.

She had not loved him better than herself, perhaps, since it was to save herself that she had driven him away. But it had not been to save herself from so small and insignificant a thing as death, though she was vital and loved life for its own sake. She had not realized, either, until it

had been almost done, how necessary it was. Yesterday she had been more cynical. Her own wickedness was teaching her the necessity of some good, and she saw now clearly that Bosio was one degree less base than herself. She believed that he would now be willing to marry Veronica, but she understood that until now he would not have done it — unless she had freed him from the galling remnant of his own conscience, and had formally given him his liberty. To give him that, in order that he might save her, she had torn out her heart by the roots.

The bitterest of all was this, that he had scarcely struggled against her will, when she had left him to himself. He had said a few words, indeed, but he could hardly have said less, if he had meant nothing. She knew well enough that at almost any point she could have brought him back, playing upon the fidelity of habit. At her voice, at her glance, for one word of her pleading, he would have come back to her feet, willing to remain. But there was no vital strength of passion in him to keep him to her against her mere spoken will. Once or twice, in spite of herself, her voice had softened; she had felt that her face betrayed her, and had turned it away; she had known that her hands were icy cold in his, and had hoped that he would not notice it and understand, and feel, perhaps, that his accursed habit of fidelity would not

let him take the freedom she thrust upon him. He had not seen, he had not felt, he had noticed nothing; and he was gone, glad to be free from her at last, willing to marry another woman, ready to forget what had held him by a thread which he respected, but not by a bond which he could not break. She had long guessed how it was; she knew it now — she had known the truth last night, when she had smoothed his soft hair with her hand and had spoken softly to him, but had not got from him the promise that meant salvation to her and her husband. Then she had known what she must do. Once more she had tried to impose her strength upon his weakness, and had failed. Then, almost without an outward sign, she had made up her mind. And now — he was gone. That was all she knew, or remembered, for an hour, as she lay there on the sofa, biting the cushions. It would have been far easier to kill Veronica, than to let him go. It was not her conscience that suffered, but her heart, and it could suffer still.

It would have been worse, had that been possible, if she had known what Bosio felt at that moment. Happily for her, she never knew. For in the midst of the life-and-death terror of the situation, he was conscious that he rejoiced at being unexpectedly free at last from the slavery of her power. It was perhaps the satisfaction of an

aspiration, good in itself, of a long-smouldering revolt against the life of deception she had imposed upon him; but in respect of his manhood, it was mean. For good is what men are, when they are doing good. It cannot be the good itself, which, though it profit many, may be so done as to stab and wound the secret enemy of the man's own heart. The good such a man does the whole world is but the knife in his hand wherewith to hurt the one. But Bosio hurt only himself, and little, at that, for he was almost past hurting; and Matilde never knew what he felt. And though he suffered most of all, perhaps, between the beginning and the end, there was no one moment of all his suffering which was like the agony of the strong and evil woman when she had driven him away, and was quite alone. She knew, now, what it meant to be alone.

When she rose at last, her face was changed; there was a keen, famished look in her eyes, and her movements were steady and direct. Her nature was very unlike Bosio's, for she was able to drive her will into action, as it were, and she could be sure that it would not turn and bend, and disappoint her. But, for the present, she could do little more, and she knew it. She could only hope that all things might go well, standing ready at hand to throw her weight upon the scale-beam if fate alone would not bear down the side that bore her safety.

She had said all that she could say to Veronica and to Bosio. Gregorio Macomer, her husband, whom she hated and despised, but whom she was saving, or trying to save, with herself, carried the effrontery of his sham-honest face and cold manner through it all, unmoved, so far as she could see. Only once or twice in the course of the day he had laughed suddenly and nervously, with a contraction of the face and a raising of the flat upper lip that showed his sharp yellow teeth. No one noticed it but Matilde, and it frightened her. But hitherto he had said nothing more since he had first confided to her, as to his only possible helper, the nature of his danger.

She had not reproached him with what he had done. The danger itself was too great for that, and perhaps she had suspected its approach too long to be surprised at his confession. She had paid very little attention to the words he used; for, considering his nature, it was natural that he should, even in such extremity, attempt to throw a side-light of dignity upon his misfortunes, and should call crimes by names which suggested honest dealing to the ordinary hearer, such as 'transference of title,' 'reinvestment,' 'realization,' and the like; all of which, in plain language, meant that he had taken what was not his, without the shadow of authorization from any one, in the quite indefensible way which the law calls 'stealing.'

Matilde had been amazed, however, at the impunity he had hitherto enjoyed. The mere fact that the estate had never been handed over by the guardians, of whom she was one and Cardinal Campodonico the third, was probably in itself actionable, had Veronica chosen to protest; and it was an indubitable fact that Gregorio Macomer had taken large sums after the guardianship had legally expired. There had been none to hinder him and Lamberto Squarci from doing as they pleased. The cardinal was deeply engaged in other matters, and was, moreover, not at all a man of business. He believed Gregorio to be honest, and now and then, when he talked with Veronica, he applauded her wisdom in leaving the management of her affairs in such experienced hands.

Matilde unlocked her door when she felt that she was once more mistress of herself and able to face the world. A woman does not lead the life she had led for years without at least knowing herself well and understanding exactly how far she can rely upon her face and voice. She knew when she rose from the sofa that she could go through the remainder of the day well enough; and though her eyes gleamed hungrily, there was a cynical smile on her lips as she turned over the red cushion, on which there were marks where she had bitten it, and softly unlocked the door. She went into her dressing-room, beyond, for a moment, to smooth

her hair. That was all, for there had been no tears in her eyes.

When she returned, she was surprised to see her husband standing before the window, with his back to the broad sunshine, peacefully smoking a cigarette. The smoke curled lazily about his grey head, in the quiet air, as he allowed it to issue from his parted lips almost without the help of his breath. His face was like stone, but as he opened his mouth to let out the wreathing smoke, his lips smiled in an unnatural way. Matilde half unconsciously compared him to one of those grimacing Chinese monsters of grey porcelain, made for burning incense and perfumes, from whose stony jaws the thick smoke comes out on the right and left in slowly curling strings. His expression did not change when he saw her, and as he stood with his back to the light, his small eyes were quite invisible in his face.

"What news?" he asked calmly, as he closed the door and came forward into the room. "Is all going well?"

His breath, as he spoke, blew the clouds of smoke from his face in thin puffs.

"If you wish things to go well," answered Matilde, "leave everything to me. Do not interfere. You have an unlucky hand."

She sat down in the corner of the sofa, taking a book from the table, but not yet opening it. He smoked in silence for a moment.

"Yes," he said presently. "I have been entertaining. But I have great confidence in you, Matilde — great confidence."

"That is fortunate," replied his wife, coldly. "It would be hard, if there were no confidence on either side."

"Yes. Of course, you have none in me?"

He laughed suddenly, and the sound was jarring and startling, like the unexpected breaking of plates in a quiet room. Matilde's lips quivered and her brow contracted spasmodically. She hated his voice at all times, as she hated him and all that belonged to him and his being; but during the past twenty-four hours he had developed this strange laugh which set her teeth on edge every time she heard it.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked impatiently. "Why do you laugh in that way?"

"Did I laugh?" he inquired, by way of answer. "It was unconscious. But my voice was never musical. However, in the present state of our family affairs, a little laughter might divert our thoughts. Have you seen Bosio to-day? Why did he not come to luncheon? I hope he is not ill, just at this moment."

Matilda 'placed' her voice carefully, as a singer would do, before she answered.

"He is not ill," she said. "He was here an hour ago. I did not ask him why he did not come to luncheon, because it did not concern me."

"Well? And the rest?"

"The rest? How anxious you are!" she exclaimed scornfully. "The rest is as well as ill can be. I think he will marry Veronica."

"I should suppose so, if she will marry him," observed Macomer. "It would be as sensible to doubt that a starving man would take bread, as to question whether a poor man will accept a fortune, especially in such an agreeable shape. It is quite another matter, whether the fortune will give itself to the poor man. What does Veronica say? Is she pleased with the idea?"

"Moderately. She has not refused. She wishes to think about it."

"I hope that she will not think too long. To-day is the tenth of December. There are just three weeks. By the bye, Matilde, I hope you have put the will in a safe place. Where is it?"

Matilde paused two seconds before she answered. Though she could not imagine in what way Gregorio could improve his desperate position by getting the will out of her hands, nor by tampering with it, of which she knew him to be quite capable, yet, on general principles, she distrusted him so wholly and profoundly that she determined to deceive him as to the place in which she kept it. Being clever at concealing things, she began by showing it to him. She rose, took a key from behind a photograph on the mantelpiece, and unlocked the drawer

of her writing-table. The will lay there, folded in a big envelope.

"Here it is," she said. "Do you wish to look over it again?"

She drew it half out of the cover and held it up before him. He recognized the document and seemed satisfied.

"Oh! no," he answered. "I know it by heart. I only wished to know where it was."

"Very well; it is here," said Matilde, putting it back and locking the drawer again. "I generally carry the key about with me," she added carelessly, "but I have no pocket in this gown, so I laid it behind that photograph. It is not a very good place for it, is it?"

She hesitated, holding the key in her hand, and looking about the room while he watched her. The woman's enormous power of deception showed itself in the spontaneous facility with which she went through a complicated little scene, quite improvised, in order to mislead her husband. She knew that he himself would suggest some place for the key to lie in.

"Put it under the edge of the carpet in the corner near the door," he suggested. "You can easily turn the carpet up a little between the rings."

"That is a good idea," she said. "It is as well that you should know where it is, in case anything were to happen to me."

She was already in the corner, and she thrust the key under the doubled edge of the crimson carpet.

"You are ingenious," she observed drily, as she rose to her feet. "I should not have thought of that. It is a pity that you have not been able to apply your ingenuity better in other ways, too. It has been wasted."

"I am not sure," answered Macomer, thoughtfully. "If Bosio marries Veronica, our position will be a very good one, considering the misfortunes through which we have passed. If he should not, and if Veronica should die, it will be much better. I am not sure but that, if I had no affection for the girl, I might prefer that she should die."

Matilde glanced at him sideways, uneasily.

"We will not speak of that," she said, as though it were a disagreeable subject.

"No."

Then, without warning, his jarring, crashing laughter filled the room again for a moment, and she started as she heard it, and looked round nervously.

"I really wish you would not laugh in that way," she said, with a frown. "There is nothing to laugh at, I assure you."

"I did not know that I laughed," said Macomer, indifferently. "That is the second time in a quarter of an hour. How odd it would be if I were to laugh unconsciously in that way when—" He seemed to check the words that were coming.

"When, for instance?" asked Matilde, not guessing what was passing in his mind.

"At the funeral," he answered shortly. Matilde started again, and looked at him anxiously. She had resumed her seat after she had handed the key, but she now rose and went to him. He was still standing before the window, though he had finished his cigarette and had thrown away the end of it. She stood before him a moment before she spoke, facing her eyes severely on his face.

"Control yourself!" she said sternly. "I understand that you are nervous and overstrained. That is no reason for behaving like a fool."

He also paused an instant before speaking. Then, all at once, his features assumed an expression of docility, not at all natural to him.

"Yes," he answered. "I will try. I think you are quite right. I really am very much overstrained in these days."

Matilde was surprised by his change of manner, but was glad to find that she could control him so easily.

"It will pass," she said more gently. "You will be better in a day or two, when everything is settled."

"Yes — when everything is settled. But meanwhile, my dear, perhaps it would be better, if you should notice anything strange in my behaviour, like my laughing in this absurd way, for instance,

just to look at me without saying anything — you understand — it will recall me to myself. I am convinced that it is only absence of mind, brought on by great anxiety. But people are spiteful, you know, and somebody might think that I was losing my mind."

"Yes," she answered gravely. "If you laugh in that way, without any reason, somebody might think so. I will try and call your attention to it, if I can."

"Thank you," said Macomer, with his unpleasant smile. "I think I will go and lie down now, for I feel tired."

He turned from her, and made a few steps towards the door. He did not walk like a man tired, for he held himself as erect as ever, with his head thrown back, and his narrow shoulders high and square. Nevertheless, Matilde was anxious.

"You do not feel ill, do you?" she asked, before he had reached the door.

He stopped, half turning back.

"No — oh, no! I do not feel ill. Pray do not be anxious, my dear. I will take a little aconite for my heart, and then I will lie down for an hour or two."

"I did not know that you had been converted to homœopathy," said Matilde, indifferently. "But, of course, if it does you good, take the aconite, by all means."

"I do not take it in homœopathic doses," answered Gregorio. "It is the tincture, and I sometimes take as much as thirty or forty drops of it in water. Of course, that would be too much for a person not used to taking it. But it is a very good medicine. Indeed, I should advise you to take it, too, if you ever have any trouble with your heart."

"How does it affect one?" asked Matilde, turning her face from him, and speaking indifferently.

"It lowers the action of the heart. Of course, one has to be careful. I suppose that one or two hundred drops would stop the heart altogether, but a little of it is excellent for palpitations. Do you suffer from them? Should you like some? I have a large supply, for I always use it. I can give you a small bottle, if you like."

"No," answered Matilde, still looking away from him, towards the photographs on the mantelpiece. "I am afraid of those things. They get into the system, as arsenic does, and mercury, and such things."

"Not at all," said Macomer. "You are quite mistaken. That is the peculiarity of those vegetable — those strong vegetable medicines. They are quite untraceable in the system, and altogether defy chemistry."

Matilde was silent a moment.

"Well," she answered, with an air of indifference, "I have a tendency to a little palpitation of the

heart, and if you will give me a bottle of your medicine, I will try it once. It can do no harm, I suppose."

"Not in small quantities. I will bring it to you by and by."

"Very well."

He went out, and a moment later she heard his dreadful laugh outside. In an instant she reached the door, opened it, and called after him: —

"Gregorio! Do not laugh!"

But he was gone, and there was no one in the passage.

CHAPTER VIII.

VERONICA did not appear at dinner that evening, but remained in her room, sending word to the countess that she had a headache and wished to be alone. Matilde thought it not unnatural that the girl should wish to reflect in solitude upon the grave problem which had been given her for consideration. It would be wiser, too, not to disturb her, but to leave her to herself to reach her own conclusions. Matilde knew that Veronica had considerable gifts of contrariety, and that it would be a mistake to press her too closely for a definite answer. Besides, it was always a tradition in such cases that a young girl should have, in name at least, perfect independence of action, and the ultimate right to refuse an offer or accept it.

It was hard to sit still at the dinner table and behave with an appearance of being reasonable, while knowing that the fate of the household depended upon the answer of the young girl — from the personal liberty of two out of the three persons who sat at the meal, to the disposal of the forks and spoons with which they were eating, and the roof over their heads. It was very hard even to

make a pretence of swallowing a little food, when all three knew the truth, and none dared to refer to it in any way lest the servants should guess at what was taking place. They spent a terribly uncomfortable hour in one another's society. The two men exchanged indifferent remarks. Matilde occasionally said something, but her mind ran constantly on absurd details, such as the incident of the hiding of the will. As soon as her husband had left her, she had taken it from the drawer, relocking the latter, and again placing the key under the carpet. Then she had taken the will into her dressing-room and had hidden it temporarily in another drawer. To distract her mind during dinner, she tried to think of a better place for it, and at last determined to unscrew the wooden back of a large old silver mirror which stood on her dressing-table, and to lay the two open sheets of the document upon the back of the looking-glass. When it was all screwed up again, it would not be easy to find Veronica's will. Matilde also thought of the aconite which Gregorio had recommended her to keep, and of where she could put it, out of the way of the servants.

Once, towards the end of dinner, Gregorio's terrifying laugh broke out suddenly, as the butler was offering him something. The man started back a little and stared, and the spoon and fork clattered to the ground over the edge of the silver

dish. Bosio started, too, but Matilde fixed her eyes sternly on Gregorio's face. He saw that she looked at him, and he nodded, suddenly assuming the expression of docility she had noticed for the first time in the afternoon.

Before they left the table they were all three in that excruciating state of rawness of the nerves, in which a man has the sensation that his brain is a violent explosive which a single jarring sound or word must ignite and blow to atoms, like a bomb-shell.

And all the while Veronica sat peacefully in her room, before her fire, wrapped in a loose soft dressing-gown, her little feet upon the fender before her and a book in her hand. A lamp in an upright sliding stand was on one side of her, and on the other stood a small table. From time to time her maid brought her something from dinner, of which she ate a mouthful or two between two paragraphs of her novel.

It was a great pleasure to her to dine in this way, alone, but it was one she rarely had an opportunity of indulging. Even when her aunt and uncle lined out she generally had her dinner in the dining-room with Bosio, who scarcely ever went into society at all. On such occasions they generally sat together half an hour after the meal was over, before separating, and it was then that they really enjoyed each other's conversation. It was very

rarely that Veronica yielded to her wish to be alone and pleaded a more or less imaginary indisposition in order to stay in her room. Even then, she was not quite sure of being alone for the whole evening, for Matilde sometimes came in after dinner and remained with her for half an hour. It had always been the countess's habit to show the greatest concern and consideration for her niece.

But to-night Veronica knew that she should not be disturbed; for she understood that this was to be an important epoch in her life, upon which all the future must depend, and that, since she had asked time for consideration, Matilde would not intrude upon her solitude. Knowing that she had as many hours before her as she pleased to take, she began the arduous task of self-examination by greedily reading a novel which Bosio had given her two days earlier, and which she had not opened. Somehow, she fancied that while she was reading her mind would decide itself. The immediate question was not really whether she should accept Bosio or not, but whether she should go again on the morrow to her friend Bianca Corleone, between eleven and twelve o'clock. That Gianluca della Spina would be there, she had not a doubt, and the idea of going there to meet him presented itself to her mind as a dangerous and mad adventure. If she hesitated, however, it was not on account of meeting the man who was dying of love for her,

but rather for fear of what Taquisara might think of her if she thus answered his summons to the interview. He had promised that he would not be present, and this gave her courage; but Bianca would see and understand, for Bianca had first spoken to her of Gianluca, that very morning, and as for Taquisara, he would, of course, soon know all about it from his friend.

The arguments in favour of going were very strong, since she was asked to say, at short notice, whether she would marry Bosio Macomer or not. In all that Matilde had told Bosio the elder woman had been quite right. Veronica was strongly prejudiced in his favour, and what Taquisara had managed to say in a few words about the interested nature of the proposal, not only had little weight with Veronica, but was the only point which had not pleased her in her interview with the Sicilian. After all, he had attacked her only near relatives in hinting, and more than hinting, that they wished to gain possession of her wealth. She was really ignorant of the fact that Cardinal Campodonico had so rarely even made a pretence of inquiring about the state of her fortune. She met him occasionally, and he never failed to say something pleasant to her, which she afterwards remembered. Whenever Gregorio Macomer spoke to her of business, he used the cardinal's name to give weight to his statements, and

Veronica naturally supposed that the princely prelate was informed of all that took place, and approved of everything which Macomer did. It was no wonder that she turned á deaf ear to Taquisara's warning, which, as coming from Gianluca's friend, seemed calculated purposely to influence her against marrying Bosio.

In reality, and apart from the little superficial argumentation with which Veronica had diverted her own mind during the late hours of the afternoon, she had made up her mind that before seriously considering the question of marrying Bosio, she would see Gianluca and give him just such an opportunity of speaking with her alone, as she had given his friend Taquisara. There was really much directness of understanding and purpose in her young character, together with a fair share of tenacity; for, as Matilde had told Bosio, Veronica was a Serra, which was at least equivalent to saying that she was not an insignificant person of weak will and feeble intelligence. She was indeed the last of her name, but the race had not decayed. It was by accident and by force of circumstances that it had come to be represented by the solitary young girl who sat reading a novel over her fire on that evening, caring very little for the fact that she was a very great personage, related to many royal families, a Grandee of Spain and a Princess of the Holy Roman Empire, all in

her own right alone, as Veronica Serra—all of which advantages Taquisara had hastily recapitulated to her that morning. So long as she should live, the race was certainly not extinct, nor worn out: for she had as much vitality as all the tribe of the Spina family taken together. She was not, indeed, conscious of her untried strength, for she had never yet had any opportunity of using it: and in the matter of the will, which was the only one that had yet arisen in which she might have tried herself, she had yielded in the simple desire to get rid of a perpetual importunity. Beyond that she had attached very little importance to it. Her aunt might be miserly, but Veronica, in her youth and health, could not think it even faintly probable that she should die before the elder woman and leave the latter her fortune. Taquisara's hasty counsel had therefore fallen in barren ground. She scouted the idea that Gregorio Macomer had ruined himself in speculations, for she believed him to be a man of extraordinary caution, and probably something of a miser.

Taquisara had therefore not prejudiced her at all against Bosio, nor against the idea of marrying the latter. And Matilde, as has been said, was quite right in supposing that Veronica would see much in favour of the marriage.

Bosio was distinctly a desirable man for a husband. Nine women out of ten would have admitted

this without hesitation. The strongest argument against the statement seemed to lie in the fact that there were a few faintly grey streaks in his thick and silky hair. For the rest, whatever he chose to say of himself, he was still within the limits of what one may call second youth. He was only between fifteen and sixteen years older than Veronica, and such a difference of age between man and wife does not generally begin to be felt as a disadvantage until the man is nearly sixty. He was not at all a worn-out dandy, with no illusions, and no constitution to speak of; for circumstances, as well as his own sober tastes, had caused him to lead a quiet and restful life, admirably adapted to his sound but delicately organized nature. He was decidedly good-looking, especially in a city where beauty is almost the exclusive distinction of the other sex. His figure, though slightly inclined to stoutness, was still graceful, and he carried himself with a good bearing and a quiet manner, which might well pass for dignity. So much for his appearance. Intellectually, in Veronica's narrow experience of the world, he was quite beyond comparison with any one she knew. It is true that she really knew hardly any one. But her own intelligence enabled her to judge with tolerable fairness of his capacities, and she had found these varied and broadly developed, precisely in the direction of her own tastes.

Lastly, Matilde was right in counting upon the existing intimacy as a factor in the case. The idea of being suddenly betrothed to marry an almost total stranger was as strongly repugnant to Veronica as it seems to be attractive to most girls of her age and class in Southern Italy.

The fact is, perhaps, that the majority of such young girls learn to think of themselves as being sure to lead hopeless and helpless lives, unless they are married; and as very few of them possess such attractions or advantages as to make it a positive certainty that they can marry well, they grow up with the idea that it is better to take the first chance than to risk waiting for a second, which may never come. To these, marriage is a very uncertain lottery; and if they draw a prize, they are not easily persuaded to throw it back into fate's bag, and play for another. The very element of uncertainty lends excitement to the game, and they readily attribute all sorts of perfections to the imaginary stranger who is to be the partner of their lives.

But in this, Veronica's ideas were quite different. She had assuredly not been brought up in vanity and pride of station, and though naturally proud, she was not at all vain. From her childhood, however, she had received something of that sort of constant consideration which is the portion of those born to exalted fortunes. She had never had less of it, perhaps, than in her aunt's house; for the Countess

Macomer was not only of her own race and name, and therefore too near to her to show her any such little formalities of respect, but had also, as a matter of policy and with considerable tact, managed to keep the dominant position in her own house. She had shut out the little court of young friends who would very probably have gathered round her niece — acquaintances of Veronica's convent days, older than herself, but anxious enough to be called her friends — and the tribe of men, old and young, who, in the extremely complicated relationships of the Neapolitan nobility, claimed some right to be treated as cousins and connexions of the family. All these Matilde had strenuously kept away, isolating Veronica as much as possible from young people of her own age, and proportionately diminishing both the girl's power to choose a husband for herself and her appreciation of her own right to make the choice. Nevertheless, Veronica knew that she had that right, and she intended to exercise it. Unconsciously, however, her judgment had been guided towards the selection of Bosio, so that she was now by no means so free an agent as she supposed herself to be. She did not love him at all; but she liked him very much, and admired him, and since it was time for her to be married, she was strongly inclined to choose for her husband the only man of her acquaintance whom she both admired and liked.

These long and tedious explanations are necessary in order to explain how it came about that Veronica Serra, with her great position and vast estates, seriously thought of uniting herself with such a comparatively obscure personage as Count Bosio Macomer. Taquisara had very fairly described the latter's position to her that morning as that of an insignificant poor gentleman, in no point of name or fortune the superior of five hundred others, and who might naturally be supposed to covet the dignities and the wealth which Veronica could confer upon him. But Veronica had resented both the description and the suggestions which had accompanied it, which showed well enough how strong her inclination really was.

On the other side, there remained the impression made upon her by what Taquisara had said for Gianluca, and last of all the impression made upon her by Taquisara himself, as a man, and as a standard by which to measure other men in the future.

With regard to Gianluca, Veronica was indeed curious, but she was also somewhat sceptical. She could not, of course, say surely that a young man might not die of love for a girl whom he scarcely knew; and among the acquaintances of her family she remembered at least one case in converse, where a morbid maiden of eighteen years had died because she was not allowed to marry the man she loved.

174

Even there, it had been hinted that the girl had caught a bad cold which had fastened upon her delicate lungs. It was doubtless a romantic story, and if anything appealed to her for Gianluca, it was the romance in his case. Her reading had been very limited as yet, and the book she was reading so eagerly was a French translation of the Bride of Lammermoor. The romance of it spoke directly to her imagination; but when the book was closed she did not believe that she had a romantic disposition. It is an indisputable fact that the people to whom the strangest things happen never regard themselves as romantic characters, whatever others may think of them. They are, indeed, more often active and daring people, to whom what others think extraordinary seems quite natural and easy. They make the events out of which humanity's appetite for romance is fed, and become, to humanity, themselves the unconscious embodiments of romance itself. In her heart, therefore, Veronica was a little sceptical about the reality of the terrific passion by which, according to Taquisara, his friend was consumed. She recalled his face distinctly, as she had seen him half a dozen times in the world, and she thought the definition of him which she had given Bianca Corleone a very just one. He reminded her of one of Perugino's angels — with a youthful beard. If angels had beards, she thought, without a smile, they would have beards like Gian-

luca della Spina's, very youthful, scanty, curling, and so fair as to be almost colourless.

She remembered that he had looked at her rather sadly, and had spoken little and to no purpose, making futile remarks about juvenile amusements, and one or two harmless little jokes which she had quite forgotten, but to which he had referred at the next short meeting, at some other house, on the corner of some other similar sofa. That was all that she could call up out of her memories. She had thought him insipid. Once she remembered distinctly that while he had been talking to her, she had been watching Bianca Corleone's handsome brother, Gianforte, whom she had seen only once before, and that when her companion had asked her to agree with him, she had said 'yes,' without having the least idea of what he had been saying. He had produced only a very slight and transparent shadow amongst the figures of her recollections. It was a severe tax on her credulity to try and believe that he was dying for love of her. If it were true, she thought, why had he not had the courage to make her understand it? The fact that the offer made by his family had not been communicated to her might have been hard to explain, but she was not disturbed for want of an explanation. She did not care for the man in the least, and there might be fifty reasons why her aunt and uncle should think him undesirable. On the whole,

she believed that Taquisara had enormously exaggerated the state of the case. The Sicilian himself impressed her as singularly honest and bold, but she was much more ready to believe that the friend who had sent him might have interested views, than that Bosio Macomer, whom she liked and admired, was anxious to get possession of her fortune.

Taquisara himself had struck her as something new in the way of a man, of a sort such as she had never seen nor dreamt of, and her mind dwelt long on the recollection of the interview. In some way which she could not explain, she vaguely connected him with the book she was now reading — the Bride of Lammermoor; in other words, he appeared to her in the light of a romantic character, and the first that had ever come within the circle of her experience. His recklessness of formalities, of all the limits supposed to be set upon the conversation of mere acquaintance, of what she might or might not think of him individually, so long as she would listen to what he had to say for his friend, seemed to her to belong to a type of humanity with which she had never come in contact. He, and he only, as yet had stirred some thought of another existence than the one which seemed to lie straight before her, — a broad, plain road, as the wife of Bosio.

Of love, indeed, there was nothing in her heart, for any man. Within her all was yet dim and

still as a sweet summer's night before the dawning. In her firmament still shone the myriad stars that were her maiden thoughts, not yet lost in the high twilight, to be forgotten when love's sun should rise, in peace, or storm, as rise he must. Under her feet, low, virgin flowers still bloomed in dusk, such as she should find not again in the rose gardens or the thorn-land that lay before her. In maidenhood's tender eyes the greater tenderness of woman awaited still the coming day.

CHAPTER IX.

THE weather changed during the night, and when Veronica awoke in the morning the gusty southwest was driving the rain from the roof of the opposite house into a grey whirl of spray that struck across swiftly, to scourge the thick panes with a thousand lashes of watery lace.

As Veronica watched her maid opening the heavy old-fashioned shutters, one by one, the sight of each wet window hurt her a little more, progressively, until, when all were visible, she could have cried out of sheer disappointment. For she had unconsciously been looking forward to another day like yesterday, calm and clear and peaceful with much sunshine. But even in Naples it cannot always be spring in December — though it generally is in January. She had hoped for just such another day as the preceding one. She had remembered how she and Taquisara had stood in the sunlight by the marble steps in Bianca Corleone's garden, and she had expected to stand there again this morning with Gianluca, to hear what he had to say.

That was impossible, however, and while she was

slowly dressing she tried to decide what she should do. It was easy enough to make up her mind that she must see Gianluca, but it was much more difficult to determine exactly how she should find an excuse for going out alone on such a morning. It seemed probable that, whatever she might propose as a reason, her aunt would immediately wish to accompany her. They had given her the afternoon and the evening of the previous day in which to think over her answer, and Matilde might naturally enough expect to hear it this morning. In any case she should not be able to order the carriage and slip out alone as she had done the first time. She had meant to go out on foot with her maid, and then to take a cab in the street and drive to the villa. But in such weather as this she could not do such a thing without exciting remark. It was a week-day, and there were no masses to hear, as an excuse, by the time she was dressed.

She watched herself in the glass, while her maid was doing her hair. The dull light of the rainy morning made her own face look grey and sallow. She had not slept very well, and her eyes were heavy, she thought. The glaring whiteness of the thing she had thrown over her shoulders while her hair was being brushed made her look worse. She had little vanity about her appearance, as a rule, but on that particular day she would have been glad to look her best.

Not that she at all believed that Gianluca was dying for her; but he was certainly in love with her. Of that she felt sure, for she could not suppose that Taquisara himself was not convinced of the fact. Nor had she the smallest beginning of a tender sentimentality about the fair-haired young man. Nevertheless, if she was to meet him, she did not wish to be positively ugly, as she seemed to be to herself when she looked into the mirror, facing the dulness of the rain-beaten window. Whether she herself was ever to care for him or not, she somehow did not wish to disappoint him by her appearance, and the undefined fear lest she might affected her spirits. Then, before she had quite finished dressing, Matilde Macomer knocked at the door and came in. She was looking far worse than Veronica, and from the absence of colour in her face, her eyes seemed to be more near together than ever. Her appearance made Veronica feel a little more hopeful, and the young girl said to herself that after all the light of a rainy day was unbecoming to every one, and much more so to a woman of forty than to a girl of twenty.

She did not wish to be alone with her aunt if she could help it, and she promptly invented several little things for her maid to do, in order to keep the latter in the room. The maid was a thin, dark woman of middle age, from the mountains. She was a widow, and her husband had been an under-

steward on the Serra estate at Muro, who had been brutally murdered five years earlier by half a dozen peasants whose rents had been raised, when he endeavoured to exact payment. The rents had been raised by Gregorio Macomer, and the woman knew it, and remembered. But she was very quiet and grave, and seemed to be satisfied with her position. She was certainly devoted to Veronica. Matilde glanced at her two or three times, as though wishing her to go, but Veronica paid no attention to the hint.

After exchanging a few words with her niece the countess began to walk up and down nervously and seeming to hesitate as to what she should say. She was horribly anxious, and very much afraid of betraying her anxiety. She knew how dangerous it might be to press Veronica for an answer before it was ready. And Veronica stood before a tall dressing-mirror, making disjointed remarks about the weather, between her instructions to her maid, while apparently altogether dissatisfied with her appearance. First she wished a little pin at her throat, and then she gave it back to the woman and told her to look for another which she well knew would be hard to find. Then she quarrelled with a belt she wore, — for just then belts were in fashion, as they are periodically without the slightest reason, — and she thought that perhaps she would not wear one at all, and she asked Matilde's opinion.

The countess forced herself to consider the matter with an appearance of interest. But she was not without resources, and she suddenly bethought her of a belt of her own which Veronica might try, and sent the maid for it, apparently oblivious of the fact that, being fitted to her own imposing figure, it would be far too long for her niece. As soon as the woman had shut the door Matilde seized her opportunity.

"Have you come to any conclusion, Veronica dear?" she asked, making her voice full of a gentle preoccupation.

"I have not seen Bosio," answered the young girl. "How can I decide, until I have seen him?"

"I thought that you did not wish to see him last night—"

"No—not last night. I wished to be alone—but—one of these days, I should like to talk to him."

"One of these days! To-day, dear. Why not? He is naturally anxious for your answer—"

"Is he? It seems so strange! We have seen each other every day, for so long—and I never supposed—"

She broke off, not, apparently, from any shyness about going into the subject, but because she was very much interested in the fastening of the second pin she had tried.

"I suppose it is much better not to wear any

jewelry at all," she said, with exasperating indifference.

"Until you are married!" answered Matilde, who was not to be kept from the matter in hand. "You see, everything turns upon that," she continued, with a low laugh. "The sooner it is decided, the sooner you may wear your jewels. No," she went on rapidly. "Of course you never suspected that Bosio loved you, and he would have been very wrong to let you know it, until your uncle and I had given our permission. But he was diffident even about mentioning the matter to us. You cannot have known him so long without having discovered that he has great delicacy of feeling. He did not like to suggest the marriage. You will see when you talk with him after this. I have very much doubt whether he will have the boldness to speak very directly —"

"How absurd!" exclaimed Veronica. "As though we did not know each other intimately!"

"Yes, but that is the man's nature, and I like it in him. You can easily manage to let him understand at the first word what you have decided. But if you would tell me first, — especially if you mean to refuse, — it would be better. I myself wish only the happiness of you both. You must be absolutely free in your decision. After all, I daresay that you will refuse him."

With great mastery of her tone and manner, she

spoke in an indifferent way. She was trying the dangerous experiment of playing a little upon Veronica's contrariety. The young girl laughed.

"That is not at all certain!" she answered. "Only I do not see why you should all be in such a hurry. If Bosio has been in love with me so long as you say, he will remain in love long enough for me to think over the matter, will he not? If he has been in a state of anxiety for weeks, it will not hurt him to be anxious for one day more — or a week more — or even a month. After all, it is for all my life, you know, Aunt Matilde. I must see how the idea looks when I am used to it. I am not a child, and I am not foolishly frightened at the idea of being married, nor out of my mind with joy at it, either, like a girl of the people."

"Of course not," said Matilde, growing a little pale with sheer nervousness.

"I daresay that we should be very happy together," continued Veronica. "But how can I possibly be sure of it? No — I suppose that one is never sure of anything until one has tried, but one may feel almost sure that one is going to be sure; that is what I want, before I say 'yes.' Do you wonder?"

"Oh, no!" answered the countess, quickly agreeing with her. "On the contrary —"

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the return of the maid. The belt, as was to be ex-

pected, did not fit at all, and Veronica put on her own again. The maid moved about the room, setting things in order.

"Give him a sign, if you wish him to speak when you meet," said Matilde, in a low voice. "It will be so much easier for him. Wear a flower in your frock to-night at dinner — any flower. May I tell him that?"

"Yes," answered Veronica, for it seemed a charitable suggestion so far as Bosio was concerned. "I am going out, now," she added suddenly. "May I have the carriage?"

"Certainly. Shall we go together?"

"Oh, no! I do not want you at all!" cried the young girl, frankly and laughing. "I have a secret. I will take Elettra with me."

Elettra was the name of the maid.

"Very well," replied Matilde. "I suppose you will tell me the secret some day. Is it connected with New Year's presents? There are three weeks yet. You have plenty of time."

Veronica laughed again, which was undoubtedly equivalent to admitting her aunt's explanation, and therefore not, in theory, perfectly truthful. But she did not wish the countess to know that she was going to Bianca Corleone's house, since Matilde would of course suppose, if she knew it, that she was going to consult Bianca about accepting Bosio, which was not true either. She laughed, therefore, and said

nothing, having got the use of the carriage, which was all she wanted.

"It is horrible weather," observed Matilde, looking at the window, upon which the rain was beating like wet whips, making the panes rattle and shake.

"Yes, but I want some air," answered Veronica, in a tone of decision.

At such a time it was not safe to irritate the girl even about the smallest matter, and Matilde said nothing more, though under other circumstances she would have made objections. As it was not yet time to go out, and in order to get rid of her aunt, Veronica bade Elettra take out a ball gown which needed some change and improvement, Matilde understood well enough that it was useless to wait longer for the chance of being again alone with her niece, and in a few minutes she went away.

On the whole, she had the impression that the prospect was very good. But after she had closed the door, she turned in the outer room, stood still a moment and looked back, allowing her face for a moment to betray what she felt. The expression was a strange one; for it showed doubt, fear, conditional hatred, and potential vengeance — a complicated state of mind, which the cleverest judge of human faces could hardly have understood from Matilde's features. Then, with bent head, and closed hands hanging by her sides, she went on her way.

An hour later Veronica and her maid were driving through the rain westward, towards Bianca's villa. As they approached their destination, Veronica felt that she was by no means as calm and indifferent as she had expected to be. Yesterday, it had seemed a very simple matter to go to the garden, to find Gianluca there, to walk ten or twenty paces with him out of hearing of Bianca, and to listen to what he had to say. In a manner it had seemed, indeed, a wild and romantic adventure, which she should remember all her life. But it had looked easy to do, whereas now, all at once, it looked very hard. Again and again, on the way, she was on the point of stopping the carriage and returning. It all looked so different, at the last minute, from what she had expected.

It was raining, and she should find Bianca indoors. Probably she would be sitting in her boudoir, beyond the drawing-room, and Pietro Ghisleri would be with her. Veronica would have to give some little excuse or reason for coming, on his account, even though Bianca was her intimate friend. Probably Gianluca would be there already, for it was past eleven o'clock, and Bianca would understand that his coming was the result of what Taquisara had said to Veronica on the previous day. She would not show that she understood, even to Veronica, because she was tactful, but Veronica knew that she was sure to blush, in spite

of herself, at the thought that Bianca knew why she had come. Then, too, in the drawing-room, or the boudoir, it would not be easy to be alone with Gianluca. She could not get up and go and stare stupidly out of the window at the rain, taking him with her.

She was naturally too obstinate to change her mind, and turn back; yet by the time the brougham drove into Bianca's gate, she really hoped that Gianluca might not come at all. But when she crossed the threshold of the house, she already hoped that he might be there. Her doubts were soon set at rest by the sight of his thin face and almost colourless beard, in the distance, as the servant opened the door of the drawing-room. Bianca was seated at the piano, and Gianluca was standing on one side of her, while Ghisleri bent over her on the other, looking at the sheet of music before her. She rose, as Veronica entered, — a queenly young figure, with a lovely, fateful face. To-day her eyes were dark and shadowy, and Veronica thought that she must have been crying in the night.

Gianluca had started visibly when Veronica had appeared, but she did not look at him until she had kissed Bianca, and had spoken to Ghisleri, who now, for the first time, understood the meaning of Gianluca's unexpected morning visit. Bianca had guessed it almost immediately, and had purposely

sat down to the piano to look over the music. It would seem natural, she thought, when Veronica came, that she should resume her seat, and play or sing, with Ghisleri to turn over the pages for her, while Veronica and Gianluca could talk. She was too loyal to her friend, and too discreet, to have given Ghisleri a hint, even had she been able to do so after Gianluca had come. But events proved to her that she was right.

When Veronica, at last, spoke to the younger man, there was an evident constraint in her manner. He, on his part, blushed suddenly pink, and then turned white again, almost in a moment. He put out his hand nervously, and then withdrew it, not finding Veronica's, but before he had quite taken it back, hers came forward, and hesitated in the air. Then he took it, and both smiled in momentary embarrassment over the incident, and a little at the thought of having shaken hands at all, for it is a custom reserved in the south for married women.

"Do you mind if I go on trying this song?" asked Bianca, sitting down to the piano again. "Talk as much as you please," she added. "I do not know it — I only wish to look it over."

Veronica was surprised at the ease and simplicity with which matters were arranged, and in a few seconds she found herself sitting beside Gianluca, on a narrow sofa at some distance from Bianca and Ghisleri. Gianluca looked at her sideways, and

then a moment later she looked at him; but their eyes did not meet. She had only glanced at him once, and for an instant after they had sat down, side by side, but she had got a good view of his face in that one look. It was evident to her that he was really ill, whatever might be the cause of his illness. The delicate features were unnaturally thin and drawn, and there were blue shadows at the temples such as consumptive men often have. The blue eyes were sunk too deep, and there were hollows above the lids, under the brows. His figure, too, though tall and well proportioned, had seemed frail to her when she had seen him standing by the piano, and his hands were positively emaciated.

She could not help pitying him. But it is only pity for sorrow, or for trouble, that is akin to love, not pity for physical weakness; unless, perhaps, a woman is very certainly sure that such weakness is indeed the result of love for herself, wearing the man out night and day — and then the pity she feels is instantly all but love itself and in fact often more than love in deeds. But Veronica had no such certainty. She still believed that Taquisara had overshot the mark of truth. She waited for Gianluca to speak.

"We have met — I have had the honour of meeting you — several times already, Donna Veronica, since you came from the convent," he said at last, after a little preliminary cough.

"Oh, yes," [illegible]

"We have often [illegible]

"I was not quite sure [illegible] me," he said.

He looked at her [illegible] quickly in [illegible] as he changed [illegible]

"You must think [illegible] ory," observed Veronica [illegible] tionally, but [illegible] therefore [illegible] rassment. "The last time [illegible] theatre, I think — at the [illegible] ten days ago — wasn't it?"

"Yes," he answered [illegible] last time I saw you. But the last time we spoke was at the ball [illegible]."

"Was it? I do not remember. We have often talked — a little — at different places."

"I remember very well," said [illegible] with a good deal of emphasis and looking earnestly at her.

Veronica tried to recall the conversation on the occasion to which he referred, but could not remember a word of it.

"Did I say anything especial, that time?" she asked, wondering whether she had then unfortunately answered 'yes,' in a fit of absence of mind, to some question of hidden import which he had perhaps addressed to her.

"Oh yes!" he answered promptly. "You told me that you liked white roses better than red ones. You see, I have a good memory."

"That was a tremendously important statement." Veronica laughed, somewhat relieved by the information.

"I always remember everything you say," said Gianluca. "I think I know by heart all you have ever said to me."

He spoke with a sort of grave and almost child-like conviction.

"I shall remember everything you say to-day," he added, after a moment's pause.

"I hope not!" exclaimed Veronica. "I sometimes say very foolish things, not at all worth remembering, I assure you."

"But what you say is worth everything to me," he said, with another sudden blush, and a quick glance, while his hands twitched.

He was painfully shy and embarrassed, and was producing anything but a favourable impression upon Veronica. She was sorry for him, indeed, in a superior sort of fashion, but she thought of Taquisara's bold eyes and strong face, and of Bosio Macomer's quiet and refined assurance of manner, and Gianluca seemed to her slightly ridiculous. It was in her blood, and she could not help it. Some of her people had been bad, and some good, but most of them had been strong, and she liked

strength, as a natural consequence. Moreover, she had not enough experience of the world to put Gianluca at his ease; and a sort of girlish feeling that she must not encourage him to say too much made her answer in such a way as to throw him off his track.

"It is very kind of you to say so," she answered lightly. "But I am sure I do not recollect ever saying anything important enough for you to remember. Take what we are saying now, for instance —"

"I shall know it all, when you are gone," interrupted Gianluca, harking back again. "Indeed — I hope you will not think me rude or presumptuous — but I thought that perhaps I might meet you here — if I came often, I mean; for Taquisara —"

"Oh yes," said Veronica, as he hesitated. "I met Baron Taquisara here yesterday. I daresay that he told you so."

As his embarrassment had increased, hers had completely disappeared — which was a bad sign for him and his hopes.

"Yes — yes. He told me —"

Gianluca leaned back suddenly in his seat, overcome with a sort of shame at the thought that Taquisara had spoken to her for him, and that he himself could find nothing to say. His face grew pale and red, and his hands trembled.

"I like your friend," said Veronica, quietly, wondering whether he felt ill.

"Yes — I am glad," answered Gianluca. "He is a true friend, a good friend. If you knew him as well as I do, you would like him still better."

Veronica thought this probable, but refrained from saying so, and remained silent. Bianca was touching gentle chords at the piano. Now and then a few words, sung in deep, soft notes, sad as the south wind, floated through the room, and then she and Ghisleri talked about the song, paying no attention whatever to the pair on the sofa.

Gianluca sighed and caught his breath. Veronica glanced quickly at him, and then looked again at the top of Ghisleri's head, as the latter bent down. She had not thought that she had expected so much of the meeting. She certainly had not the slightest personal feeling for the man beside her. And yet, somehow, she was dismally disappointed. If this was the man who was dying of love, she infinitely preferred Bosio Macomer. Gianluca was evidently in bad health. He looked as though he might be in a decline, and he was clearly very nervous and ill at ease. But he did not speak at all as she supposed that a man would who was deeply in love. Taquisara had spoken far better. He had seemed so much in earnest that if he had suddenly substituted himself for Gianluca as the

subject of his phrases. Veronica could have believed him easily enough.

"Then I may hope that you will forgive me for coming here, thinking that I might meet you?" said the young man, with a question in his voice.

"Why should you not come?" asked Veronica, not unkindly, but with the least possible inflexion of impatience.

"There can certainly be no reason, if you are not offended," he answered. "But if I thought that I had offended you, by coming, I should never forgive myself."

"But I should certainly forgive you, if you offended me unintentionally. Besides, there is no reason in the world why you should not come here to see Bianca whenever you like, if she will receive you. She goes out very little. She is glad to see people."

He was a man born to throw away opportunities, an older woman would have thought; but Veronica grew impatient at his insistence upon useless things, and his thin, nervous hands irritated her vaguely as, looking down, or in front of her, she could not help seeing them clasped upon his knee. Once, too, she was aware that Bianca leaned to one side and looked towards her, round the side of the sheet of music, as though to see how matters were progressing. Veronica began to feel that she was in a ridiculous position. The hesitation and pauses and

silences had made the brief conversation already last nearly a quarter of an hour. In that time Taquisara had said all he had to say. Veronica made a little movement, a very slight indication that she would presently leave her seat. Gianluca started and suddenly gazed earnestly into her face, so that she turned her head and met his eyes.

"Please do not go yet!" he cried in a low and earnest voice that had real entreaty in it.

"No," she answered quickly. "I am not going. But I must go soon. I cannot stay long, for I must go home to luncheon, and I have not talked with Bianca at all yet."

"Yes — I know — and I must be going too," he said nervously. "But if you knew what it is to me to sit here beside you for a few minutes — " He stopped suddenly, and the colour rushed to his face.

"In what way?" asked Veronica, with an impatient, womanly impulse to make him speak and have done with it, in order that there might be no more misunderstanding.

"Because — because I love you, Donna Veronica!" He turned quite white as he found words at last. "I must say it this once, even if you never forgive me. This is the first happy moment I have had since I saw you the last time. I love you — let me tell you so before I die, and I shall die happy if you will forgive me, for I have dreamed of saying

it, and longed to say it so often. You are my whole life, and my days and nights only have the hours of my thoughts of you to mark them."

His words came confusedly and uncontrolled, but his voice had a longing pathetic ring in it, as of a very hopeless appeal. Veronica had been startled at first, and her eyes were wide and girlish as she looked at him. It was the first time that any man had ever told her that he loved her, and for that reason it was to be memorable; but it did not seem to be the first time. Taquisara's manly pleading and fervent voice when he had spoken yesterday had left her ears dull to this real first time of hearing love speeches, so that this seemed the second, and the words she heard, after the first little shock of realizing what they were, touched no chord that would respond.

She did not answer at first, but half unconsciously she shook her head, as she turned from him and looked away once more. Perhaps that was the most unkind thing she could have done; for it was so natural, and simple, and unaffected a refusal, that he could hardly be mistaken as to her meaning; and, after all, she had led him on to speak. She herself was shocked at her own heartlessness a moment later, and in one of those absurd concatenations of ideas which run through the mind at important moments, she felt as though she had been giving a merchant an infinity of trouble

to show his wares, only to buy nothing and go away. Then the brutality of the involuntary simile distressed her, too, and she felt that she ought to say something to destroy the effect of it on her own mind, as well as to comfort Gianluca. But she could not find much to say. Very young women rarely do, under the circumstances.

"I am very sorry," she said gently.

She felt that he might have a right to reproach her for coming there, and she was grateful to him for not doing so, having really very little idea of the nature of the over-submissive and humble love which sapped his manliness instead of rousing his courage.

"Ah, I knew it!" he almost moaned, and resting his elbows upon his knees he covered his face with his delicate, white hands, that trembled spasmodically now and then. "I knew it," he repeated in his broken voice. "You were kind to let me speak — I kiss your hands — for your kindness — I thank you — "

His voice broke altogether. Veronica heard a smothered sob, and glancing at him nervously, saw the tears trickling down between his fingers. She looked up quickly to see whether Bianca had noticed anything, but the sweet, deep voice was singing softly to the subdued chords of the piano, and Veronica sat quite still, waiting for Gianluca to recover his self-control.

She felt that she pitied him, but at the same time considered him in some way an inferior being; and as the idea of marrying him crossed her mind again, her heart started in repugnance at the mere thought.

CHAPTER X.

VERONICA left Bianca Corleone's house with a very painful sense of disappointment, and as she drove homeward through the wet streets, she could not get rid of Gianluca's tearful blue eyes, which seemed to follow her into the carriage; and in the rattling and jolting, she heard again and again that one weak sob which had so disturbed her. At that moment she would rather have gone directly back to the convent in Rome, to stay there for the rest of her life, than have married such an unmanly man as she believed him to be. His words had left her cold, his face had frozen her, his tears had disgusted her. She pitied him for his weakness, not for his love of her, and she hoped that she might never again hear any man speak to her as he had spoken. Nevertheless there had been in his tone, at the last, the doubt-splitting accent of a sharp truth that hurt him to tears. She wondered why he had not moved her at all. The day seemed more grey and wet and desolate than ever. She thought that everybody in the street looked draggled and disappointed. Near Santa Lucia she passed a wretched vender of strung filberts and

doubtful cakes, mounting guard over his poor little handcart with a dilapidated umbrella, under the half-shelter of a projecting balcony. A couple of barefooted boys crouched on the wet pavement by the sea-stairs, with a piece of sacking drawn over both their heads together, gnawing hard-tack, and as the rain struck the stones, it splashed up in their faces under their sack. On the left, the coral shops showed their brilliant wares dimly through the rain-streaks, with closed glass doors through which here and there the disconsolate face of the shopkeeper was visible, as he stood gazing out upon the dismal, dripping scene. A sailor man came out of the marine headquarters at the turning of the Strada dei Giganti, bending his flat cap against the rain and burying his ears in the blue linen collar of his shirt, which was turned back over his thick jacket. The water splashed out from under his heavy shoes, to the right and left, as he walked quickly up the hill. Beyond that, the Piazza San Ferdinando was deserted, and the broad wet pavement lay flat and darkly gleaming upward to the broad, watery sky that stretched grey and even, without shading, like a sheet of wet india rubber over all the city. Then the Toledo, where the gutters could not swallow the deluge, but sent their overflow in dark yellow streams down each side of the street — then the narrower, darker ways and lanes between the high

houses and the low, black doorways, through the heart of old Naples, home at last to the Palazzo Macomer.

Veronica was glad to get back to the fire in her own room, and to feel dry again — for seeing so much water had given her the sensation of being drenched. And she sat down to think over what had happened in the morning, trying to understand her own disappointment, because she believed that she had expected nothing, and therefore that she could not be disappointed. She was very glad to get back to her own room. So far as she at all knew what a home meant, the Palazzo Macomer was home to her, and she had no distinct recollection of any other. Gregorio and Matilde and Bosio were her own family, so far as she had ever known what to understand by the word. They were more familiar to her than any other people in the world possibly could be, and if she felt that she had little affection for her aunt and uncle, yet she knew that there was a bond; and she was sincerely attached to Bosio for his own sake.

She had photographs of all three on the mantelpiece, in silver frames, — that of her aunt standing in the middle, and one of the men on either side. She looked at Bosio's, taking it down from its place. She looked at it critically, and seeing a speck of dust on the glass, just over the face, she passed her handkerchief over it, polishing the surface, and

looking at it again. From the photograph any one would have said that Bosio was a handsome man, for he photographed well, as the phrase goes. His clear, pale complexion, his well-cut, refined features, his smooth, thick, silky hair looked singularly well against the smoked background, and had at once the strength and the transparency which make a good photograph by adding an illusion of relief to the flatness of mere outline and light and shade. Probably the likeness was flattered. But Veronica did not think so just then, coming as she did from a disillusionment which had affected her more strongly than she knew. She compared Bosio with Gianluca, in appearance, and Gianluca lacked almost everything which could bear comparison. She compared Bosio with Taquisara, and she preferred the quiet refinement of the one to the bold eyes and high aquiline features of the other. At least, she thought so. But she also preferred Taquisara to Gianluca, by many degrees of preference. Yet both these men were commonly spoken of as handsome.

She thought of another point, too, and with her blood it was natural that she should think of it. If she married Bosio, he would take her name and titles; not she, his. She would rule the house and be independent — not of him, exactly, for she was fond of him and had no desire to be despotic over him, but of parents and elders and relations who

would think it their right to advise and guide. All this would be different with Gianluca for her husband. The Della Spina were proud of their name and would expect her to bear it. They were numerous, too; the old father and mother would oppress and burden her life, and the brothers and sisters of Gianluca would grow up to be more or less of a perpetual annoyance to their elder brother's wife. Of that side of life her aunt had given her more than one picture, intentionally exaggerating a little, perhaps, for her own purposes. And from Bianca she had heard many things of the same kind. Married to Bosio, she would be free altogether from any one's interference in her household.

She met them all at luncheon, and was struck by the fact that both men, as well as Matilde, looked pale and harassed, as though they had slept little. For there was little sleep or rest, except for Veronica, during those days of gnawing anxiety. She was struck, too, and startled, by Gregorio's hideous laugh, which broke out twice during the meal without any apparent reason. Even the servants seemed to shudder at it and looked at him anxiously, and Matilde's dark eyes tried to control him. Indeed, when she looked at him, he seemed docile enough, except that his face twitched very strangely as he nodded to her.

But they all talked, with the evident intention of seeming at their ease; and in a measure they

succeeded, for they were not weaklings like Gianluca. Bosio was by far the least strong in character, but his very remarkable self-possession made him their equal in the present case. On the previous evening, when Veronica had not been present, they had scarcely made an effort; but now that she was seated at table with them, they performed their parts conscientiously and not without success.

They were encouraged, too, by Veronica's manner to Bosio. After her experience in the morning it was a distinct pleasure to be again in his society, and she talked enthusiastically to him of the Bride of Lammermoor — the book he had given her and which she had begun to read during her solitary dinner on the previous evening. She was sure of the response to what she said, before she said it, and it came surely enough. She felt that he understood her, and that she should be glad to talk with him every day. Several days had passed since they had been alone together for half an hour.

She compared him with the photograph of him, too, and she came to the conclusion that the likeness was not so much flattered, after all. His unusual pallor to-day had something luminous in it, and the features, in two days of suffering, had grown thinner with a sort of finely chiselled accentuation of their natural refinement. To-day, he reminded her of certain portraits of Van Dyck.

But when luncheon was over, she avoided being alone with him, for she had not yet come to any decision. It would be more true, perhaps, to say that she distrusted herself in the decision she now seemed to have reached too suddenly. For in the expansion of sympathy she enjoyed so much it all at once seemed to her that she could never marry any one but Bosio, who understood her so well, who anticipated what she was going to say, and knew beforehand what she thought upon almost any subject of conversation.

She had never been exactly opposed to the idea, from the first; but now it took possession of her strongly, as it had never done before, and she might almost have taken her genuine affection for the man for love, if she had ever been taught to suppose that love was necessary before marriage. She had been far too carefully brought up in Italian ideas of the old school, however, to make any such self-examination necessary. She had been told that it was important that she should like and respect the man she was to marry. She had no reason for not respecting Bosio, so far as she knew, and she certainly liked him very much indeed.

But she meant to wait until the evening, and give herself a chance to change her mind once more. After luncheon there was the usual adjournment to another room for coffee, over which the two men smoked cigarettes. Veronica expected that Matilde

would ask her by a gesture, or a word in a low tone, whether she were any nearer to a conclusion than before, but the countess did nothing of the sort, for she was far too wise; and Veronica was grateful for being left entirely to her own thoughts in the matter. Nor did Bosio bestow upon her any questioning glance, nor betray his anxiety in any way except by his pallor, which he could not help, of course. Veronica thought that once or twice his eyes brightened unnaturally, in the course of conversation; and in his manner towards her she might have fancied that there was a shade more than usual of that sort of affectionate deference which all women love, though they love it most in the strong, and it sometimes irritates them a little in the weak, for a passing moment, when their caprice would rather be ruled than flattered. Bosio made no attempt to be alone with her, and at the end of half an hour both he and his brother departed to their own quarters.

Even then, when she was alone with Veronica, Matilde did not return to the subject which was uppermost and above all important in her mind. With amazing tact and self-control she talked pleasantly enough, though she managed to place herself with her back to the light, so that Veronica could not see her expression clearly. At last she rose and said that she must go out. The weather had improved a little, and she asked Veronica to go with

her. But the young girl had no desire to be driven through Naples in a closed carriage a second time that day, and she went away to her own room, with the intention of spending a quiet afternoon by the fire with her novel.

On the previous evening she had read a little over her dinner, and from time to time during the short evening she had returned to the book, feeling that it was easier to read than to think, and much more satisfactory. She took the volume now, but she could not read at all. She was overcome by a wish which seemed wholly unaccountable, to send for Bosio to meet her in the drawing-room, and to tell him outright that she was willing to marry him. Nothing but maidenly self-respect prevented her from doing so at once, and the hours seemed very long before dinner. Many times she rose from her seat by the fire and moved about her room in an objectless way, touching things uselessly and looking for things which were not lost, which she did not want, but which she could not find. She wished that she had her great jewels. She would have tried them on before the mirror — anything to pass the time. But they were all safely stored in one of the safest banks.

She grew more and more restless as the minutes passed and the dinner hour approached. Looking at herself in the glass, she said that her cheeks were no longer sallow, as they had seemed to be in

the morning. There was a fresh colour in them, and it was becoming to her and pleased her. Her soft hair had fallen a little upon each side of her brows, and her eyes were brilliantly bright. She looked at them when the twilight was coming on, and they seemed to shine, with wide pupils, having a light of their own.

At last the time came. Before she rang for her maid, who had brought lights and had gone away again, she stood a moment before the fire and looked once more at Bosio's photograph, asking herself seriously for the last time whether she should marry him or not. But the answer was there before the question, and she had made up her mind.

At the last minute, she had forgotten the flower she had promised to wear, and she sent her maid in haste to see whether she could find one of any sort in the house. It was the middle of December, and it was not probable that such a thing could be found in the Palazzo Macomer. The maid came back empty-handed. Veronica told her to find an artificial one, and Elettra, after some searching, produced a very beautiful artificial gardenia, which Veronica pinned in her white bodice, with a smile. She glanced at herself once more, and saw that the colour was still in her cheeks, and she was satisfied with herself.

When she entered the drawing-room, the other

three were already there, and she saw the faces of Matilde and Bosio change as they caught sight of the flower. Gregorio apparently knew nothing of the arrangement — another instance of Matilde's tact which pleased Veronica. Matilde herself was no longer pale. She had seen how desperate she looked and had put a little rouge upon her cheeks so deftly and artistically that the young girl did not at first detect the deception. But her features had still been drawn and weary. They relaxed suddenly in a genuine smile when she saw the gardenia. But Bosio grew paler, Veronica thought, and looked very nervous. At table, he was opposite Veronica, and he reminded her more than ever of Van Dyck's portraits, so that she wondered why she had never before thought of the general resemblance. He talked less than at luncheon, and sometimes his eyes rested on hers with an expression which she could not understand. But there was admiration in it, as well as something else. Veronica herself was animated, and had never looked so well before, in the recollection of the other three.

After dinner Gregorio disappeared almost immediately, and at the end of a quarter of an hour Matilde left the room, merely observing that she was going to write letters and would come back when she had finished. Bosio and Veronica were alone.

To her, it seemed to have come suddenly at the end, and she did not quite realize how it was that she found herself standing on one side of the fireplace, while he stood on the other.

They looked at each other a moment. Then Veronica smiled faintly, and drew herself up — or lengthened herself — as slight young girls have a way of doing when they are pleased, and she turned a little in the movement, and glanced at the clock, still faintly smiling.

Bosio was watching her, and he could not help admiring her lithe figure and small, well-poised head, that had a sort of girlish royalty of carriage not at all connected with beauty; for she was not beautiful, and she herself knew that there were times when she was almost ugly. He saw and admired, and he cursed himself for what he meant to do. He was not sure, even now, that he could do it.

There was no awkwardness in the silence, Veronica thought, for it seemed to her that he understood, and that words were hardly necessary. If she had meant to refuse him, she would have done so through Matilde. She smiled, looking at the clock, and thinking about it all. Then she realized that no word had been spoken on either side, and she turned her head a little shyly, till she could just see his face, while the smile still lingered on her lips. One hand rested on the mantel-

piece, with the other she touched the artificial gardenia in her bodice.

"That is my answer, you know," she said quietly, and her eyes waited for his.

But he only glanced at her face, and for a moment he did not move. Then, with a graceful inclination he took her hand and raised it to his lips. She noticed even then that his own hand was dry and burning. He did not trust himself to speak. When he looked up, the room whirled with him, and he saw strange colours. He thought his teeth were chattering.

"Are you glad?" she asked, wondering a little at his silence now, and the room seemed strangely still all at once.

"Is it quite of your own free will?" he asked, as though it cost him an effort to say anything.

"Yes — quite. Of course!" Her face grew bright as though she were happy in removing the one doubt he had.

"I am very glad of that," he said quietly.

"Do you think that I would marry any one under pressure?" asked Veronica, with a soft laugh. "I will tell you something that will convince you. It is a secret. You must not tell my aunt that I know. I could have married Don Gianluca della Spina. Perhaps you know that. Did you? I did; but I will not tell you how. Only, you see — I did not care for him."

Bosio had recovered his self-possession, which had been only momentarily shaken. For there had been no surprise — he had known what to expect.

"I only knew lately of the Spina's proposal," he said. "But — shall I thank you, Veronica? Or do you understand without words? We have known each other so long, that perhaps you may."

"I think I understand," she answered.

She put out her hand again and pressed his, and again he kissed her fingers. The action was reverential, and had nothing in it of the man who loves and is accepted. Her gentle hand, maidenly and innocent, was stretched down into the hell of word and thought and deed in which his real self had its being, and he touched it with his lips, and in his heart he knelt to kiss it, as something too holy to be in this world — just because it was innocent, and his own was not. For herself he set her on no pedestal, he did not worship her, he did not love her, he admired her with the cold judgment of a man of taste. It is the purity of the unblemished and unspotted victim that makes the outward holiness of the sacrifice. He thought of his own life and of hers, hitherto side by side, and he thought of their joint life in the future, she taking him for what he was not, and he was ashamed.

In the first moment he had a brave impulse to tell her everything and be a man, even if he ruined

the woman he had loved so long, as well as the brother who bore his name. It was only an impulse, and his lips remained sealed and his face calm.

"I do thank you," he said in a low voice, when he had kissed her hand that second time. "I will do what I can to make you happy."

Yet he knew now, from the strength of that passing impulse, that if she had not spoken first, he would not have asked her directly to marry him. Twenty times during that long day, alone in his room, he had sworn that he would not marry her, whatever happened. For it was not enough that Matilde had set him free, and that he had rejoiced for one hour in his liberty. That was not enough. Matilde could not undo the work of many years by a word and a gesture. His hell was already a desert without her. But now, there was no drawing back.

Forty-eight hours ago, in that very room, almost at that hour, he had told Matilde that he would never marry Veronica Serra. And now, almost on the same spot, and facing the same way, he was telling Veronica Serra that he would do his best to make her happy.

"I am sure you will," she answered.

"I should deserve evil things if I did not," he said, passing his hand over his eyes, to shut out the sight of the innocence that faced him.

Suddenly it came over him that she must expect him to say more, to be passionate, to say that he loved her beyond all mortal things, and set her far above immortality itself, and such unproportioned phrases of the love-sick when the instant healing of response touches the fainting heart. All that, she must expect. Why not? Other women expected it, and heard all they desired, well or ill spoken, according to the man's eloquence, but always well according to their own hearts. Surely he must say something also. He must tell her how he had dreamed of this instant, how her white shade had visited and soothed his dismal hours — and the rest. As he thought what he should say, love's phrase-book turned to a grim and fearful blasphemy in his own inner ears. But she expected it, of course, and he must speak, when he would have given the life he had to save her from himself and to save himself from the last fall, below which there could be no falling. It was almost impossible. If he had not loved Matilde Macomer still, he would have turned even then and spoken the truth, come what might. But that remained. He gathered the weakness of his sin into an unreal and evil strength, as best he could, and for Matilde's sake he spoke such words as he could find — lies against himself, against the poor rag of honour in which he still believed, even while he was tearing it from the nakedness of a sin it could

not clothe — lies against love, against manhood, against God.

"I have loved you long, Veronica," he began. "I had not hoped to see this day."

The awful struggle of his own soul against its last destruction sent a strong vibration through his softened voice, and lent the base lie he spoke such deadly beauty as might dwell in the face of Antichrist, to deceive all living things to sin.

He was still standing, and his hand lay out towards Veronica, on the shelf before the clock. Slowly she turned towards him, at the first sound of his words, wondering and thrilled.

"Is it long? I do not know," he continued. "It is more than a year, since I first knew what this love meant. For I have loved little in my life — little, and I am glad, though I have been sorry for it often, for all I ever had, or have, or am to have till I die, is for you, Veronica, all of it — the love of heart and hand and soul, to live for you and die for you, in trust and faith, and love of you. You wonder? Beloved — if you knew yourself, you would not wonder that I love you so! There is no man who could save himself, if he lived by your side, as I have lived. You smile at that? Well — you are too young to know yourself, but I am not — I know — I know — I thought I knew too well, and must pay dear for knowing how one might love you and live. But it is not too well,

now. It is life, not death. It is hope, not despair — it is all that life and joy can mean, in the highest."

He paused, his eyes in hers, his hand still stretched out and lying on the shelf. Gently hers sought it and lay in it, and there was light in her face, for she believed. And he, in his suffering within, was moved; as a man is, who, being in his life but a poor knave, plays bright truth and splendid passion on a stage, and the contrast that is between being and seeming, in his heart, makes him play greatness with a strong will, born of certain despair.

"I am glad," said Veronica, softly, and she looked down, while her hand still lingered in his, and he went on.

"It is not easy for a man like me to believe that he has all the world in his grasp — in the hold of his heart, to be his as long as he lives. But you are making me believe it now — all that I did not dare to think of as even most dimly possible in my lonely life — that is why I thank you, that is why I bless you, and adore you, and love you as I do, as I can never make you guess, Veronica, as I scarcely hope you dream that a man may love a woman. That is why I would die for you, Veronica, if God willed that I might!"

The great words lacked no outward sign of living truth. His hand burned hers, and closed upon it,

pressure for word, to the end, in the terrible play of acted earnestness. Even his eyes brightened and filled themselves, determined to lie with all of him that lied to her.

Had he hated her, had it been a vengeance to make her love him in payment of a past debt of wrong, it would have seemed less foully base in his own eyes. But he liked her. She had always trusted him and liked him too, and there had been only kindness between them always. That made it worse, and he knew it. But he could do the worst now, he thought, for he had altogether given over his soul, to leave it in hell, without hope.

"I pray God that I may be worthy of your love," said Veronica, gently and earnestly.

He drew her towards him by her little hand, and himself came softly nearer to her, till his other hand was on her shoulder, drawing her still. She yielded, not knowing what she should do. Quite close she was, and he held her, unresisting, and kissed her. She had known, but she had not realized. The scarlet blood leapt up in maiden shame, and she started back a little. But she thought that he had the right to do it.

"Good night," she said, with downcast eyes, for she felt that she could not stay to look at him.

"Good night, love," he whispered.

He let her go, and she slipped from him, leaving him still standing in his place. The door closed

behind her, and he was alone, very quiet and pale, thinking of what he had done, and not rejoicing, for he knew the depth of its meaning.

He was glad it was over, for if it had been to do again, he could not have done it. His lips were parched, his throat was dry, his hands were burning; he felt as though his head were shaking on his shoulders, palsied by a blow. But such as the deed was, it had been well done, to the end. The devil, if he cared for his own, would be pleased. He had even kissed her. He knew what Judas had been, now, and what he had felt.

He did not know how long he stood there. It might have been a quarter of an hour or more; but though he watched the clock's face, his eyes saw no movement of the hands upon the dial. It seemed to him that the room was dark.

Then the door opened again, and he started and looked round, fearing lest Veronica might have come back — or her ghost, for he felt as though he had killed her with his hands. But it was Matilde Macomer. She glanced round the room and saw that Veronica was gone.

"Well?" she asked, coming swiftly forward to where Bosio was standing, pale as death under her rouge.

He faced her stupidly, with heavy eyes, like a man drunk.

"It is all over," he said slowly.

She started forward, not understanding him.

"Over? Broken off?" she cried, in horror.

"Oh no!" he answered with a choking laugh, bad to hear. "It is done. It is agreed. She accepts me."

Matilde drew breath, and pressed her hand to her left side for one moment — she, who was so strong.

"You almost killed me!" she said, so low that Bosio hardly caught the words.

Slowly she straightened herself, and the colour came back to her face, blending with the tinge of the paint. He did not move, and she came and stood near him, leaning her elbows upon the mantelpiece and turning to him.

"You have saved me," she said. "I thank you."

Bad natures can be simple, if they are great enough, and Matilde spoke simply, as she looked at him. She had been almost terrible to look at a few moments earlier, with the rouge visible on her ghastly cheeks. No one could have detected it now, and she was still splendid to see, as she stood beside him, just bending her face upon her clasped hands while her deep eyes melted in his.

He knew the difference between her and Veronica, and he straightened himself, till he looked rigid, and an unnatural smile just wreathed his lips, half hidden in his silky beard. He told himself that he had fallen the last fall, to the very depths;

yet he knew that there was a depth below them, and he tried to turn his face from her, seeking refuge in the thought of what he had done, from the evil he still might do.

"I have been thinking over all I said to you yesterday afternoon," she said gently. "I meant it, you know — I meant it all."

"I trust to Heaven you did!" answered Bosio.

"Yes, dear, I meant it," she said in a voice of gold and velvet. "I will try to mean it still. But — Bosio — look at me!"

He turned his eyes, but not his face.

"Yes?" His voice was not above his breath.

"Yes — but can you? Can I? Can we live without each other?"

"Yes, we must." He spoke louder, with an effort.

She drew nearer to him, strong and soft.

"Yes? Well — but say good bye — not as yesterday — not as though it were good bye — one kiss, Bosio, only one kiss — one, dear — one — "

And in it, her voice was silent, for it had done its tempting, and she had her will, on the selfsame spot where he had kissed Veronica. Then he trembled from head to foot, and his heart stood still. An instant later he was gone, and she had not tried to keep him. She watched him as he left her and went to the door without turning.

He walked quickly when he had shut the door

behind him, and his face was livid. The depth below the depths had been too deep. He had but one thought as he went through the rooms, and the antechamber, and hall, and out upon the cold staircase, and up to his own door, and on, and in, till he turned the key of his own room behind him. There was no stopping then, either, between the door and the table, between key and lock, and hand and weapon.

Before the woman's kiss had been upon his lips two minutes, Bosio Macomer lay dead, alone, under the green-shaded lamp in his own remote room.

Peace upon him, if there be peace for such men, in the mercy of Almighty God. He did evil all his life, but there was an evil which even he would not do upon the innocent life of another. He died lest he should do it, and desperately grasping at the universal strength of death, he cast himself and his weakness into the impregnable stronghold of the grave.

CHAPTER XI.

It was still early in the morning, and all Naples knew that Count Bosio Macomer had committed suicide on the preceding evening. Every morning newspaper had a paragraph about the shocking tragedy, but few ventured to guess at any reason for the deed. It was merely stated that Count Bosio's servant had been alarmed by the report of a pistol about nine o'clock in the evening, and on finding the door of his master's room locked had broken in, suspecting some terrible accident. He had found the count stretched upon the floor, in evening dress, with his own revolver lying beside him.

That was precisely what had happened, but the meagre account gave no idea of the confusion which had ensued upon the discovery. It contained no mention of Matilde nor of Veronica, and merely observed that the brother of the deceased was overcome with grief.

That would have been too weak an expression to apply to what Matilde suffered during the hours which followed the first appalling blow. In the overpowering horror of the situation, she did not

lose her mind, but she sincerely believed that her body could not live till the morning.

To do her justice, as she sat there beside the dead man, bent and doubled in silent, tearless grief, a dark shawl drawn over her head to hide her face, and utterly regardless, for once, of what any one might think, she thought only of him and of what she had done. For she understood, and she only, in all the household.

Beyond her conscious thoughts, if they could be called thoughts at all, the black figures of the forbidding future loomed darkly in her consciousness. They were the things she knew, rather than the things she felt, but the terror of what was to be was as real as the grief for what had been, though as yet it had less strength to move her. The blow had struck her down, and until she should try to rise she could feel nothing but the blow. In truth she did not think that she should live until the morning.

It was midnight when they lit candles, and set them beside him in great candlesticks as he lay. And she sat down at his feet and watched his still face, from beneath the shawl that hung over her head. It had been in her hands when they had told her, and her fingers had closed upon it stiffly; so she had it when she came to his room. She was glad, for she could cover herself from the eyes of those who came and went, but her own eyes

could see out, from under it, and no tears blinded her. After she had sat down, she did not move.

Gregorio Macomer had come, and had gone away, and then he had come again, when all was done, and had knelt a long time beside the couch on which his brother lay, repeating prayers audibly. His face was as grey as a stone. He only spoke to give directions in a whisper, and he said nothing to his wife, but let her alone, bowed and covered as she sat. When he had prayed, he went away, with reverently bent head, and she heard that he trod softly. In two hours he came back, knelt again, and again repeated Latin words. She knew that he was doing it for a show of sorrow, and she wished to kill him. Then, when he was softly gone again, she wondered how soon she herself was to die. There were two servants in the room, behind her, keeping watch. They were relieved by two others, changing through the night. She heard them come and go, but did not turn her head.

When the dawn forelightened, like the ghost of a buried day risen from the grave to see its past deeds, she was not yet dead. She had once read how the murderers of Vittoria Accoramboni had been torn with red-hot pincers and otherwise grievously tortured, and how knives had been thrust deep into their breasts just where the heart was not, but near it, and how they had died hard,

for they had lived more than half an hour with the knives in them, and at the last had been quartered alive. She had not believed what she had read, but now she knew that it was true. She envied them the searing, the tearing, and the knives which had at last killed them, though they had died so hard.

The wan dawn turned the dead man's face from waxen yellow to stone grey. The servants saw it, whispered, and closed the inner shutters, and the yellow candle-light shone again in the room. Any light is better than daylight on a dead face.

Matilde sat still, bowed and covered. Fixed in the world of grief, the hours of sorrow passed her by. There was neither night nor day in the dead watch of the closed room, under the tall candles, burning steadily.

Then, at last, other feet were on the threshold, stumbling, shuffling, ill-shod feet of men bearing a burden. In that city, one may not lie in his home more than one day after he is dead. They set down what they bore, beside the couch, and waited, and the woman saw their questioning faces and heard them whispering. Then one of them, with some reverence and gentleness, thrust his arm under the low pillow, and with his eyes bade another lift the feet. But Matilde rose then and came between them and the dead. They thought that she would look at him once more, and they

drew back, while she looked, for she bent over his face. But the shawl about her head fell about her, and they could not see that she kissed him. They waited.

The great woman put her hands about him, and bowed herself, and lifted him from the couch, and the men could not believe it when they saw her turn with him and lay him down in his coffin, alone, with no one to help her.

For she was very strong. She stood and looked down at him a long time, and once she stopped and moved one of his crossed hands, which touched the edge. And then she drew from her neck, from beneath the shawl, a piece of fine black lace, and laid it gently over and about his head.

"Cover it," she said to the men, and she stood waiting, lest they should touch him with their hands.

She had seen his face for the last time, and when they had covered him, they laid the coffin in another of lead which they had brought, and she stood quite still, watching the gleaming melted stuff that ran along the edges of the grey lead, like quicksilver, under the hot tool of copper. When that was done, with main strength they laid him in the third, which was covered with black velvet. And there were screws.

At last they went away, and Matilde set the tall candlesticks on each side of the velvet thing, and

looked at it again. Then she, too, with still covered head, went towards the door. But between the coffin and the door, she stood still, swaying a little, till she fell to her full length backwards and straight, as a cypress tree falls when it is cut down. But she was not dead, for she was too strong to die then. The servants carried her away to her own room, calling others to help them, for she was heavy, and they had to take her down the stairs. It was afternoon then, and when she came to herself and opened her eyes, she bitterly cursed the day, for it would have been good to die. But she never went again to the room where she had watched.

She lay still a long time, alone in silence. Then, from a room beyond hers, came the wild crash of her husband's laughter. She sat up. Her face was grim and terrible, ghastly and stained with rouge, as the shawl fell back upon her shoulders. She sat up and listened, and her smooth lips twisted themselves angrily, one against the other, as a tiger's sometimes do, when there is blood in the air. She knew now that she was really alive, for she thought of Veronica.

Veronica had not known in the night. Her rooms were at the farther end of the apartment in a quiet part of the house, and when she had left Bosio she had gone to bed immediately and had dismissed her maid. Elettra came from the room

to find the household in the hideous uproar and confusion which first followed the discovery of Bosio's death. Elettra was a wise woman as well as a revengeful one. By the deeds of the Macomer, as she looked at it, her own husband had been killed, and she had cursed their house, living and dead. She had blood now, for her blood, and in the dark corridor she smiled once. But no one should disturb Veronica, and she stood there, where any one must pass to go to the girl's room, silent, satisfied, watchful. She loved her mistress, as she hated all the Macomer, body and soul, alive and dead. Some foolish women of the household would have roused Veronica, for they came, two together, asking in loud hysterical voices, whether she knew. But Elettra kept them off, and took the news herself in the morning when Veronica rang for her.

"A terrible thing has happened in the night," she said, when she had opened the windows.

Veronica opened her eyes wide and then rubbed them slowly with her slim, dark fingers and looked again at Elettra.

"It is a very terrible thing," continued the woman, gravely. "It happened in the night, and all was confusion, but I would not let them disturb you. They heard the pistol-shot and broke down the door. He was already dead. He had shot himself."

"Who?" asked Veronica, in instant horror. "Some one in the house? A servant?"

Elettra shook her head.

"No. I would not tell you — but you must know. It was Count Bosio."

Veronica turned pale and started up. "Bosio? Bosio dead?" she cried in a voice that was almost a scream.

The woman was sensible and understood her, and by that time the household was quiet, so that there was no fear lest any one else should come to Veronica's room.

But when she was quite sure of what had happened, Veronica wept bitterly for a long time, burying her face in her pillows and refusing to listen any more to Elettra. Then, if the woman had not prevented her, almost forcibly, she would have gone upstairs to see him where he lay dead. But Elettra would not let her go, for she knew that Matilde was there, and why; and moreover, it was not within her ideas of custom that a young girl should go and look at any one dead. But Veronica's tears flowed on.

At first it was only sorrow, real and heartfelt, without any attempt to reason and explain. But by and by she began to ask herself questions for the dead man's sake. In her dreams the sweet words he had spoken in the evening had come back to her, and when she had first opened her

eyes at the sound of Elettra's voice she had thought that she saw his eyes before her in the dimness, before the windows were all opened. She had not loved him yet, but those words of his had touched something which would have felt, by and by. And suddenly, he was gone. Why? It was so sudden. It was as though a part of the earth had fallen through, into space beneath, without warning. There was too much gone, all at once. She could only ask why. And there was no answer to that.

Her eyes fell upon the artificial gardenia she had worn. It lay upon the dressing-table where she had tossed it when she had taken it from her bodice. Her tears broke out again, for it had meant so much last night, and could mean now but the memory of that much, and never again anything more. It was a long time before Veronica dried her eyes, and consented to dress.

Apart from the sorrowful horror that filled her, it seemed so very strange that he should have killed himself just after she had promised to marry him, within an hour after they had spoken together of the happiness to come.

"It was an accident," she said at last, speaking to herself, as though she had reached a conclusion. "He did not mean to do it."

Elettra shook her head, but said nothing. Accident, or no accident, it was the blood of a Macomer

for the blood of her own dead husband, murdered up there in Muro by the peasants because Macomer had burdened them beyond their power to pay.

She said nothing, and Veronica expected no answer, but sat still, trying to think, while Elettra noiselessly set the big dressing-room in order. The woman had given her a black frock without consulting her.

Though Veronica liked her, and knew that she could rely on her devotion, she was not one of those Italian girls who readily confide in their serving-women, and she had told Elettra nothing about the projected marriage, and she said nothing of it now, though she was mourning her betrothed husband. But she told Elettra to go out and buy a little crape to put on the black frock, and to send for dressmakers to make mourning things quickly.

The confusion in the house had subsided into stillness. Bosio Macomer was in his coffin. The servants were exhausted, and there was no one to direct. Gregorio had been heard laughing wildly in his room, and a frightened chambermaid said that he was going mad. Elettra had great difficulty in getting something to eat, which she brought to Veronica's room with a glass of wine.

The girl's first outbreak of sorrow ebbed to a melancholy placidity, as the hours went by. She got her prayer-book, and read certain prayers for the dead. When her maid had gone out to buy

the crape, she knelt down and said prayers that were not in the book, very earnestly and simply; and now and then her tears flowed afresh for a little while. She took the artificial gardenia and put it away in a safe place, after she had kissed it; and she wondered when she remembered how she had blushed last night when Bosio kissed her that once — that only once that ever was to be. And she took his photograph and looked at it, too. But she could not bear that yet — at least, not to look at it too closely.

Vaguely she tried to think what the others might be doing in the house, and why no one came to her but her maid. It seemed to her that she was always to be alone, now, for days, for weeks, for years. As she grew more calm, she attempted to imagine what life would be without the companionship of Bosio. That was what she should miss, for she was but little nearer to love than that. It all looked so blank and gloomy that she cried again, out of sheer desolation and loneliness. But of this she was somewhat ashamed, and she presently dried her eyes again.

She did not like to leave her room, either. It seemed to her that death was outside, walking up and down throughout the rest of the house, until poor Bosio should be taken away. And again she wondered about Matilde and Gregorio, and what they were doing. She tried to read, but not the

novel Bosio had given her. She took up another book, and presently found herself saying prayers over it. The day was very long and very sad.

Before Elettra came back from her errands, a servant knocked at Veronica's door. He said that there was a priest who was asking for her, and begged her to receive him for a few moments.

"It cannot be for me," answered Veronica. "It must be a mistake. He wishes to see my aunt, or the count."

"He asked for the Princess of Acireale," said the man. "I could not be mistaken, Excellency."

"He does not know who I am, or he would not ask for me by that name. Does he look poor? It must be for charity."

"So, so, Excellency. He had an old cloak, but his face is that of an honest man."

"Give him ten francs," said Veronica, rising to get her pocketbook. "And tell him that I am sorry that I cannot receive him."

The servant took the note, and disappeared. In three minutes he came back.

"He does not want money, Excellency," he said. "He says he is the Reverend Teodoro Maresca, curate of your Excellency's church in Muro, and begs you earnestly to receive him."

Veronica rose again. She knew Don Teodoro by name, for Bosio had often spoken of him to her, as his former tutor and his friend. It was for Bosio's

sake that he had come — that was clear. Veronica asked where her aunt was, and on hearing that Matilde had retired to her own room, she told the servant to bring Don Teodoro to the yellow drawing-room.

A moment later she followed. The tall priest was standing with bent head before the fireplace, on the very spot where so much had happened during the last two days. He held his three-cornered hat in one hand, and was stretching out the other to warm it at the low flame. Veronica was a little startled by his face and extraordinary features, but he looked at her clearly and steadily through his big silver spectacles, and he had a venerable air which she liked. She noticed that when she advanced towards him, he bowed like a man of the world, and not at all like a country priest.

"I thank you for receiving me, princess," he said, gravely. "I have heard the sad news. I was Bosio's friend for many years. I spent an hour with him only the day before yesterday, during which he told me much about himself and about you. If, before he died, he told you nothing of what he told me, as I think probable, it is necessary for you to know it all from me as soon as possible. Forgive me for speaking hurriedly and abruptly. The case is urgent, and dangerous for you. Shall we be interrupted here?"

"I think not," said Veronica, considerably surprised by his manner. "But of course—" she paused doubtingly.

"Have you a room of your own, where you could receive me?" asked the old man, without hesitation.

"Yes—that is—I should not like to—"

"I am an old priest, princess, and this is a time of confusion in the house. You can risk something. It is important. Besides, I am in your own service," he added, with a quiet smile. "I am the chaplain of your castle at Muro."

"Yes—that is true." Veronica looked at him with a little curiosity, for she had never been to Muro, and it was interesting to see one of her dependents of whom she had often heard. "Come," she said suddenly. "We shall meet no one, except my maid, perhaps—Elettra. Do you know her? Her husband was under-steward, and was killed."

"I know of her—I buried him," answered the priest.

She led the way to her own part of the house, to the large room which served her as dressing-room and boudoir. After all, as he had said, he was a priest and an old man. She made him sit down beside her fire, in her own low easy-chair, for he looked thin and cold, she thought, and she felt charitably disposed towards him, not dreaming what he was going to say, and supposing that he had exaggerated the importance of his errand.

"Princess —" he began, and paused, choosing his words.

"Do not call me that," she said. "Nobody does. Call me Donna Veronica."

"I am old fashioned," he answered. "You are my princess and feudal liege lady. Never mind. It would be better for you if you were in your own castle of Muro, with your own people about you, though it is a gloomy place, and the scenery is sad. You would be safe there."

"You speak as though we lived in the Middle Ages," said the young girl, with a faint smile.

"We live in the dark ages. You are not safe here. Do you know why my dear friend Bosio killed himself last night?"

"It was an accident! It must have been an accident!" Veronica's face was very sorrowful again.

"I wish it had been," said Don Teodoro. "They will say so, in charity, in order to give him Christian burial. But it was not an accident, princess. My friend told me all the truth, the day before yesterday. It is very terrible. He killed himself in order not to be bound to marry you."

The round, silver-rimmed spectacles turned slowly to her face.

"In order not to marry me! You must be mad, Don Teodoro! Or you do not know the truth — that is it! You do not know the truth. It was

only last night that he asked me to marry him — that is — it had been my aunt who had asked me, and I gave him the answer."

"You consented?"

"Yes. I consented —"

"That is why he killed himself," said the priest, sadly. "I knew he would, if it came to that. It is a terrible story."

Veronica stared at him in silence, really believing that he was out of his mind, and beginning to feel very nervous in his presence. He shocked her unspeakably, too, by what he said about Bosio; for if the wound was not deep, perhaps, it was fresh, and his words were brine to it. He saw what she felt, and made haste to be plain.

"I am sorry that I am obliged to tell you this," he continued, after a short pause. "I cannot help it. The only thing I can do for my dead friend is to save you, if I can. I saw the account of his death in a newspaper an hour ago, and I came at once. Will you please not think that I am mad, until you have heard me? I was his friend, and I have eaten your bread these many years. I must speak."

"Tell me your story," said Veronica, leaning back in her chair and folding her hands.

He began at the beginning, and told her all, as Bosio had told him. He omitted nothing, for he had the astonishing memory which sometimes belongs to students, besides the desire to be perfectly

accurate, and to exaggerate nothing. For he knew that she would find it hard to believe him.

She listened; and as he went on, describing the struggle in poor Bosio's heart between the desire to save the woman he loved and the horror of sacrificing Veronica as a means to that end, she leaned forward again, drawing nearer to him, and watching his face keenly. Her eyes were wide, and her lips parted a little; for whether true or not, the story was terrible as he told it, and as he had said that it would be.

"I do not know what he said to you last night," he concluded. "I give you a dead man's words, as he spoke them to me; but I have no right to those he spoke to you. This is true, that I have told you, as I hope for forgiveness of my own sins. If you stay in this house, by the truth of God, I believe that your life is not safe."

"You believe it, I am sure," said Veronica. "But I cannot. The most I can believe is that poor Bosio was already mad when he told you this. It must be true. Even supposing that my uncle were the man you think, and had ruined himself in speculations and had taken money of mine without my knowledge, would it not be far more natural that he and my aunt should come to me and confess everything, and beg me to forgive and help them for the sake of their good name? Of course it would. You cannot deny that."

"It is what I told Bosio," answered Don Teodoro, shaking his head; "but he answered that they feared you, and that your death would be a safer way, because you might not be so kind. You might go to the cardinal and lay the case before him, and they would be lost."

"I might. I probably should." Veronica paused. "That is true," she continued, "but whatever I did, I could not allow the matter to come to a prosecution — for the sake of my own name, if not for theirs. But I do not believe it — I do not believe it — indeed, I do not believe it at all. Poor Bosio was not in his right mind. That is why he killed himself. He was mad, even when he talked with you the day before yesterday — it is the only possible explanation."

"Nevertheless, something must be done," said Don Teodoro. "Your safety must be thought of first, princess."

"I feel perfectly safe here," answered Veronica. "All this is madness. The countess is my father's sister. I admit that I have not always liked her, but she has always been kind. You really cannot expect me to believe that she and my uncle would plot against my life — especially now, in this terrible trouble and sorrow! I have listened to you, Don Teodoro, and I am sure that you wish me well, but I never can believe that you are right. Really — with all respect to you — I must say it. It is wildly absurd!"

And the longer she thought of it, the more absurd it seemed. The girl was naturally both sensible and brave, and the whole tale was monstrous in her eyes, though while he had been telling it she had fallen under the spell of its thrilling interest, forgetting that it was all about herself. She looked at the quiet old priest, with his extraordinary face and quiet manner, and it was far easier to believe that a man with such features might be mad than that her Aunt Matilde meant to kill her. He was silent for a few moments.

"There is a terrible logic in the absurdity," he said at last. "Your aunt constrains you to make a will in her favour, Bosio knew that his brother is ruined and that several large mortgages expire on the first of January. He knew that his brother has defrauded you in a way which is criminal. If they can get control of your money within three weeks they are saved. They persuaded Bosio and you to be betrothed. But Bosio kills himself. The main chance is gone. There remains the one with which the countess threatened him if he would not marry you — your immediate death. Against that, stands the possibility of penal servitude in the galleys for a man and woman of high rank and social position — only the possibility, to be sure, but a possibility, nevertheless. Remember that to those who know the whole extent and criminality of the count's fraud the case appears very much

worse than it does to you, who now hear of it for the first time, in a general way, and who do not understand the nature of such transactions. I have been a confessor many years, princess. I know how few penitents can be made to believe that those they have injured will pardon them, if they frankly ask forgiveness. It is human nature. The best of us have doubted God's willingness to forgive — how much more do we doubt man's! It is all very logical, princess, very logical — far too logical, whether you will believe it or not."

"If I believed the beginning," said Veronica, "I might believe it all. But it is not proved that my uncle has defrauded me, and all the rest seems absurd, if that is not true."

"I beseech you at least to be careful!" answered the priest, earnestly.

"In what way? I shall go on living here, just the same, unless we all go into the country for the rest of the winter. Even if I thought myself in danger, I do not see what I could do."

"Eat what the others eat. Drink what the others drink. Take nothing especially prepared for you. Lock your door at night. If you will not leave the house, that is all you can do."

He shook his head thoughtfully.

It was true Italian advice — against poison and smothering. Veronica smiled, even in her sadness.

"I have no fear," she said. "Let us say no more

about it. Can I do anything for the people at Muro?" she asked, by way of preparing to send him away.

"The people at Muro — the people at Muro," he repeated dreamily. "Oh yes — they are all poor — almost all. Money would help them. The best would be to come and see us yourself, princess. But if you are not careful, you will never come now," he added, turning the big spectacles slowly towards her and looking long into her face. "I have done what I could to warn you," he said, beginning to rise. "I will do anything I can to watch over you — but it will be little. Good bye. God preserve you."

As she rose she rang the bell beside her that her maid might come and show him the way out. She knew that by this time Elettra must have returned from her errands. The afternoon light was already failing.

She held out her hand, and he took it and kept it for a moment.

"God preserve you," he repeated earnestly.

He turned just as Elettra opened the door. The woman recognized him at once, came forward and kissed his hand, he having long been her parish priest. Then she led the way out. Don Teodoro turned at the door and bowed again, and Veronica, standing by the fire, nodded and smiled kindly to him. She was sorry for him. She had never seen

him before, and he seemed to be devoted to her, and yet she was sure that his mind was feeble and unsettled. No sane person could believe the monstrous things he had told her.

Outside, he made a few steps and then stopped Elettra, laying his emaciated hand upon her shoulder. He looked behind him and saw that they were alone in the passage.

"Take care of your mistress, my daughter," he said. "Naples is not Muro, but it is no better. Let her eat what others eat, drink what others drink, and take no medicines except from you, and make her lock her door at night. This is not a good house."

The dark woman looked at him fixedly for several seconds, and then nodded twice.

"It is well that you have told me, Father Curate," she said in a low voice. "I understand."

That was all, and she turned to lead him out.

CHAPTER XII.

After that, Elettra, unknown to Veronica, slept in the dressing-room every night. After her mistress had gone to bed in the inner chamber, the woman used to lock the outer door softly and then draw a short, light sofa across it; on this she lay as best she might. The nights were cold, after the fire had gone out, and she covered herself with a cloak of Veronica's. In itself, it was no great hardship for a tough woman of the mountains, as she was. But she slept little, for she feared something. In the small hours she often thought she heard some one breathing on the other side of the door, close to the lock, and once she was quite sure that a single ray of light flashed through the keyhole, below the half-turned key. Yet this might have been her imagination. And as for the breathing, there was a large Maltese cat in the house that sometimes wandered about at night. It might be purring all alone outside, in the dark, and she might have taken the sound for that of human breathing. No people are more suspicious and imaginative than Italians, when they have been warned that there is danger; and this does not proceed from natural

timidity, but from the enormous value they set upon life itself, as a good possession.

As for what Veronica ate and drank, Elettra was wise, too. She felt sure that if any attempt were made to poison her, Matilde would manage it quite alone; and she seriously expected that such an attempt would be made, after what Don Teodoro had told her. Veronica, like most Italians in the south, never took any regular breakfast, beyond a cup of coffee, or tea, or chocolate, with a bit of bread or a biscuit, as soon as she awoke. It was easy to be sure that such simple things had not been within Matilde's reach, and it was Elettra's duty to go to the pantry where coffee was made, and to bring the little tray to Veronica's room. At night, the young girl had a glass of water and a biscuit set beside her, when she went to sleep, but she rarely touched either. Elettra now brought the biscuits herself and kept them in a cupboard in the dressing-room, and she herself drew the water every night to fill the glass. So far as any food and drink which came to her room were concerned, Veronica was perfectly safe. But Elettra could not control what she ate in the dining-room. She would not communicate her fears to Veronica, either, for she knew her mistress well; and at the same time she did not know what or how much Don Teodoro had told her during his visit. Veronica was perfectly fearless, and was inclined to be

impatient, at any time, when any one insisted upon her taking any precautions, for any reason whatsoever — even against catching cold. She was not rash, however, for she had not been brought up in a way to develop any such tendency. She was naturally courageous, and that was all. She was unconscious of the quality, for she had not hitherto been aware of ever being in any real danger.

As for Don Teodoro's warning, she put it down as the result of some mental shock which had weakened his intelligence. Possibly Bosio's sudden and terrible death had affected him in that way. At all events, she was enough of an Italian to know how often in Italy such extraordinary ideas of fictitious treachery find their way into the brains of timid people. On the face of it, the whole story seemed to her utterly absurd and foolish, from the tale of Macomer's ingenious frauds upon her property, to the supposition that she was in danger of being murdered for her fortune. Murder was always found out in the end, she thought, and of course such people as her aunt and uncle, even if they had any real reason for wishing their niece out of the way, would never really think of doing anything at once so wicked and so unwise. But the whole thing was absurd, she repeated to herself, and she found it easy to put it out of her thoughts.

Meanwhile, the first days after the catastrophe

passed in that sad, unmarked succession of objectless hours by which time moves in a house where such a death has taken place. It is not the custom among the upper classes of Italians to attend the funerals of relations and friends. The servants are sent, in deep mourning, to kneel before the catafalque in church during the first requiem mass. Occasionally some of the men of a family are present at the short ceremony in the cemetery. But that is all. The family, as a rule, leaves the city at once.

Veronica wondered why her aunt and uncle did not propose to go to the country. Macomer had a pretty place in the hills near Caserta, and though it was winter the climate there was very pleasant. She did not know that the house was already dismantled, in anticipation of the probable foreclosure of a mortgage. Besides, in his desperate position, Gregorio would have feared to leave Naples for a day. As for making a journey to some other city, he was positively reduced to the point of having no ready money with which to go. Lamberto Squarci, the notary, positively refused to advance anything, and it was quite certain that no one else would. For Squarci, who was a wise villain in his way, and had aided and abetted Macomer's frauds in order to enrich himself, had only given his assistance so long as he was quite sure that he was acting as the paid agent of Veronica's guardian.

The responsibility was then entirely theirs, and he merely obeyed their directions in preparing any necessary legal documents. But as soon as the guardianship had expired, he knew that in order to be of use in helping Macomer to rob his ward, he should be obliged to artificially construct the instruments needed, in such a way as to appear legal to the world. In such business, forgery could not be far off. The man had himself to think of as well as mere money, and at the point where the smallest illegality of action on his part would have begun, he stopped short, and refused to do anything whatever, leaving Macomer to grapple with his creditors as best he might, and to take care of himself if he could. It was now the middle of December, and the guardianship had expired, legally speaking, in the previous month of March, when Macomer's debts had already reached a very high figure. Macomer, after that, had presumed upon his authority and position to draw Veronica's income for his own purposes. That was easy, as the revenues accrued almost entirely from the great landed estates, of which the various stewards were in the habit of sending the rents, when collected, directly to Macomer. It was clear that unless Veronica herself protested, and until the authorities should discover that she was being cheated, these men would naturally continue to send the rents to the order of Gregorio Macomer.

Feeling that he was near the end of his chances, he had desperately attempted to improve his position by using as much of the year's income as he could extract from the stewards, in a final speculation. This had failed. He had not been able to pay the interest on his mortgages, and the ready money was all gone. A disastrous financial crisis had supervened, which had made itself felt throughout the country, and the banks which held the mortgages had given notice that they would foreclose some of them, and not renew the others. If Gregorio Macomer could have laid hands, no matter how, on any sum of money worth mentioning, he would have fled, under an assumed name, to the Argentine Republic, the usual refuge of Italians in difficulties. But he had exhausted all he could touch, had gambled, and had lost it. If he fled now, it must be as a penniless emigrant. As he had no taste for such adventures, at his age, there was but one chance for him, and that lay in somehow getting control of Veronica's fortune before the end of the month. As for getting any more of the income, in time to be of any use in staving off the tidal wave of ruin that rose against him, there was no chance of that. The farmers all over the country paid their quarter's rents on the first of January, or should do so, but there was often difficulty in collecting, and the money would not really get to Macomer's hands much before February. By that

time all would be over; and it was not the idea of bankruptcy which frightened Gregorio; it was the certainty that a declaration of bankruptcy must lead to, and involve, a minute examination into his past transactions which had led to it.

Matilde knew all the truth, as has been shown. What she suffered in remaining in Naples, in going and coming through the familiar rooms, in spending her evenings in that room, of all others, in which she had last seen Bosio alive, no one knew. She went about silently, and her face grew daily paler and thinner. In her behaviour she was subdued and silent, though she treated Veronica with greater consideration than before. They had never spoken together of the possible reasons for Bosio's death, but it had been publicly stated that he had been insane, and Matilde, to all appearances, accepted the explanation as sufficient. It was made the more reasonable by the evident fact that Gregorio's mind was unsettled, and that he himself was in imminent danger of going mad. That, at least, was the impression produced upon the household.

As the days went by, the gloom deepened in the Palazzo Macomer, and when the three met at their meals, or sat together for a short time in the evening, the silence was rarely broken.

At first, it was congenial to Veronica; for if her grief was not passionate nor destined to be everlasting, her sorrow was profoundly sincere. It was

the companionship of Bosio that she missed most keenly and constantly, through the long, empty hours.

No one who called was received during those first days. It chanced that Cardinal Campodonico had gone to Rome to attend one of the consistories for the creation of new cardinals, which are often held shortly before Christmas. Had he been in Naples, he would of course have been admitted. He wrote to Gregorio, and to Veronica, short, stiff, but sincere, letters of condolence. He was a man of a large heart, which was terribly tempered by a very narrow understanding; generous, rather than charitable; sincere, more than expansive; tenacious, not sanguine; keen beyond measure in ecclesiastical affairs, devoted to a cause, but unresponsive to the touch and contact of humanity; hot in strife, but cold in affection.

Society came to the door of the palace and deposited cards, with a pencilled abbreviation for a phrase of condolence, the very shortest shorthand of sympathy. Veronica looked through them. All the Della Spina people had come. She found also Taquisara's plain cards, — 'Sigismondo Taquisara,' — without so much as a title, and in the corner were the usual two letters in pencil, strong and clear, but just the same as those on all the others. Somehow, she knew that she had looked through them all, in order to find his and Gian-

luca's. The letters on the latter's bit of pasteboard were in a feminine hand — probably his mother's. Veronica's lip curled a little scornfully, but then she looked suddenly grave — perhaps he had been too ill to come himself, and if so, she was sorry for him and would not laugh at him. As for Taquisara, he was so unlike other men, that she had unconsciously expected something different to be visible on his card.

The lonely girl spent as much of her time as possible in reading. But it was very gloomy. It rained, too, for days together, which made it worse. Bianca Corleone came to see her, and they sat a long time together, but neither referred to Gianluca, and very little was said about poor Bosio. It was impossible to talk freely, so soon after his death, and Veronica was not inclined to tell even her intimate friend of what had happened on that last night. It had something of a sacred character for her, and she said prayers nightly before the poor man's photograph, sometimes with tears.

Now and then Veronica felt so utterly desolate that she made Elettra come and sit in her dressing-room and sew, merely to feel that there was something human and alive near her. She enticed the Maltese cat to live in her rooms as much as possible, for its animal company. She did not talk with her maid, but it was less lonely to have her sitting there, by the window.

She supposed that before long the first black cloud of mourning would lighten a little over the house, and she had been taught at the convent to be patient under difficulties and troubles. The memory of that teaching was still near, and in her genuine sorrow, with the youthfully fervent religious thoughts thereby re-enlivened, she was ready to bear such burdens and make such sacrifices as might come into her way, with the assured belief that they were especially sent from heaven for the improvement of her soul, by the restraint and mortification of her very innocent worldly desires.

It could hardly have been otherwise. She had not yet loved Bosio, but her affection had been sincere and of long growth. On the last day of his life he had become her betrothed husband, and for one hour all her future living, as woman, wife, and mother, had been bound up with his, to have being only with him — to disappear in black darkness with his tragic death, as though he had taken all motherhood and wifehood and womanhood of hers to the grave forever. As for what Don Teodoro had said of his having loved Matilde, she believed that less than all the rest, if possible; and the fact that the priest had said it proved beyond all doubt to her that he was out of his mind. Beyond that, it had not prejudiced her against him, for there was a certain noble loftiness in her character which could largely forgive an unmeant wrong.

In her great loneliness, in that dismal household, the reality of faith, hope, and charity as the body, mind, and spirit of the truest life, took hold upon her thoughts, as the mere words and emblems of religion had not done in her first girlhood. She read for the first time the Imitation of Christ and some of the meditations of Saint Bernard. The true young soul, suddenly and tragically severed from the anticipation of womanly happiness, turned gladly to visions of saintly joy — simply and without affectation of form or show — purely and without earthly regret — humbly and without touch of taint from spiritual pride. She had no burden to cast from her conscience, and she sought neither confessor nor director for the guidance of her thinking or doing. Straight and undoubting, her thoughts went heavenwards, to lay before God's feet the sad, sweet offering of her own sorrow.

Without, in those dark winter days, storm drove storm over the ancient, evil city, rain followed rain, and gloom changed watches with darkness by day and night for one whole week, while the moon waned from the last quarter to the new. And within, Matilde Macomer went about the house, when she left her room at all, like a great, pale-faced, black shadow of something terrible, passing words. And in the library, Gregorio's stony features were bent all day over papers and documents and books of accounts, seeking refuge from sure ruin,

while now and then his face was twisted into a curiously vacant grimace, and his maniac laugh cracked and reverberated through the lonely, vaulted chamber. He often sat there by himself until late into the night, for the end of the year was at hand, with all the destruction that a date can mean when a man is ruined.

It was a big, long room, with old bookcases ranged by the walls, not more than five feet high, and closed by doors of brass wire netting lined with dark green cotton. A polished table took up most of the length between the door which led to the hall at the one end, and the single high window at the other. There was no fireplace, and the count had the place warmed by means of a big brass brazier filled with wood coals. At night, he had two large lamps with green glass shades.

Matilde sometimes came in and sat with him during the evening. She looked at him, and wished he were dead. But she was drawn there by the power which brings together two persons menaced by a common danger, in the hope that something may suddenly change, and turn peril into safety. He sat at one end of the table with his papers, and she took the place opposite to him, the lamp being a little on one side, so that they could see each other. They were a gloomy couple, in their black clothes, under the green light, with harassed, mask-like faces.

One night, Matilde came in very late. She trod softly on the polished floor, wearing felt slippers.

"Elettra sleeps in her dressing-room," she said in a low voice.

Macomer looked up, and the twitching of his face began instantly, as though he were going to laugh. Matilde brought the palm of her hand down sharply upon the bare table, fixing her eyes upon him.

"Stop that!" she cried in a tone of command. "It is very well for the servants. You are learning to do it very well. It is of no use with me."

He looked at her steadily for a moment. Then he laughed, but naturally and low.

"I might have known that you would find me out," he said. "But it is becoming a habit. It may serve us in the end. How do you know that the woman sleeps in Veronica's dressing-room?"

"I was wandering about, just now," answered Matilde, looking away from him. "I saw the door of Elettra's room ajar. I pushed it open and looked in, and I saw that her bed was not disturbed. Then I stood outside the door of Veronica's dressing-room, and listened. Something moved once, and I was sure that I heard breathing."

Gregorio watched her gravely while she was speaking, but in the silence that followed, his small eyes wandered uneasily.

"The girl is lonely," he said at last. "She makes Elettra sleep in the room next to hers, because she is nervous."

Matilde seemed to be thinking over what she had said. Some time passed before she answered, and then it was by a vague question.

"Well?"

Again they looked at each other.

"That is certainly bad," said Macomer, thoughtfully. "What are we to do? Speak to her about it? You can say that you found Elettra's door open, at this hour."

"It would do no good," answered Matilde. "We could not prevent her from having her maid there, if she wishes it."

"After all," observed Macomer, absently, "it is only a woman."

"Only a woman?" Matilde's lip curled. "I am only a woman."

Macomer nodded slowly, as though realizing what that meant, but he said nothing in answer. With his hands under the table he slipped low down in his chair, his head bent forward upon his breast, in deep thought.

"Can you not suggest anything?" asked Matilde, at last, gazing at him somewhat scornfully. "After all, this is your fault. You have dragged me into this ruin with you."

"I know, I know," he repeated in a low voice.

"But we cannot do it now — with that woman there."

"No. It is impossible now." Matilde's tones sank to a whisper.

She looked down at her strong hands that had grown thinner during the past days, but were strong still. Gregorio waited a few moments and then roused himself and bent over his papers again.

"You cannot see any way out of it, can you?" asked his wife at last. "Is there no possibility of keeping afloat until things go better?"

"No," answered Macomer, not looking up. "There is nothing to go better. You know it all. There is only that one way. Failing that, I must go mad. One can recover from madness, you know."

"Yes," said Matilde, thoughtfully. "But it is a very difficult thing to do well. They have expert doctors, who know the real thing from the imitation."

Gregorio looked up suddenly.

"She could not go mad, could she?" he asked, a quiver of cunning intelligence making his stony mask quiver. "Are there not things — is there not something — you know — something that produces that? What is all this talk, nowadays, about hypnotic suggestion?"

"Fairy tales!" exclaimed Matilde, incredulously. "The other is sure. This is no time for experiments. There are thirteen days left in

this year. If we are to do it at all, we must do it quickly."

"I do not like the idea of the pillow," said Macomer, speaking very low again.

Matilde's shoulders moved uneasily, as though she were chilly, but her face did not change.

"It is of no use to talk of such things," she answered. "Besides," she added, "you are dull. Only remember that you have just thirteen days more, after to-day."

"Remember!" his voice told all his terror of the limit.

Then Matilde did not speak again. She rested her elbows on the table, and her chin upon her hands, staring at him as though she did not see him, evidently in deep thought. He bent over his papers, but was aware that her eyes were on him. He glanced up nervously.

"Please do not look at me in that way. You make me nervous," he said.

With a scornful half-laugh she rose from her seat.

"Good night," she said indifferently, and in her soft felt slippers she noiselessly went away.

She had not come in the expectation of help from her husband in anything that was to be done. But besides the bond of fear by which they were drawn together, there was the feeling that his presence, especially in that room, brought before her vividly

the necessity for action. Under such pressure, an idea might come to her which would be worth having. It had come to-night, but it was of a nature which made it wiser not to tell Gregorio about it. Such things, being complicated and delicate, and difficult of execution, were best kept to herself, at least until her plans were matured and ready. But this time, she believed that she had at last what she wanted. The scheme flashed upon her all at once, complete and feasible, and perfectly safe, but she resolved to think it over for twenty-four hours before finally deciding to adopt it.

And while such things were being said and done in the lonely night, and deeply pondered through the long, silent days, Veronica came and went peacefully, with sad but not unhappy eyes, her thoughts fixed upon the new path by which her single sorrow was to lead her up to the eternity of all celestial joys.

In those days she determined to lead a holy life, in the memory of the dead betrothed, and perhaps in the thought that by the outpouring of much good around her, she might yet obtain mercy for the soul of one self-slain. She meant not to cut herself off from all mankind, devoting her maidenhood to heaven and her body to the servitude of slow suffering, whereby some say that the spirit may be saved most certainly — in the hard rule of daily dying, and daily rising again one day nearer

to death. That was not what she meant to do; that depth of godly dreaming was too cold and still a depth for her. There must be motion and life in her means of grace, since she had the power to make others move and live. Marriage, wifehood, motherhood, should not be for her, she said; but there was all the rest. There were the many hundreds — the thousands, indeed, had she known it — of men and women and poor children, toiling against the impossible with hands that had long learned to labour in vain, save for the bare bread of life. To them all, in many quarters of the land, she would be a mother, to help them, to feed them, and to heal them; to work for them and their welfare, as they had worked and toiled for the greatness of her dim, great ancestors, repaying to humanity, in one lifetime, what humanity had been forced to give them through many generations.

She would lead a holy life, for she would pray continually, when there was nothing else that she could do. When she could not be thinking out some good thing for her people, she would meditate upon higher things for the good of her own soul. But first and foremost should be the doing, the helping, the giving of life to the far spent, and of hope to the helpless.

There in that room, where she dwelt continually in those days, she made no vow, she registered no resolution, she imposed no one self upon another

self within her to thrust out evil and implant good. She had no need of that. It was all as simply natural as the growth of a flower, effortless, rising heavenward by its own instinct life.

In one thing only she made a determination of her will. She decided that with the new year she would at last take over her fortune and estates into her own management. Until she did that, she could not know what she had, nor where she should begin her good work. That was absolutely necessary, and of course, thought she, it presented no difficulty at all. Possibly her own indolence about it, and her distaste for going into the question of money and accounts, was a fault with which she should have reproached herself, because she might have begun to do good sooner, had she chosen. But she did not think of that. She would begin with the new year.

As though a good destiny had anticipated her desire, the first call for her help came suddenly, on the day after the last recorded conversation between Gregorio and Matilde.

It was still early in the morning when Elettra brought her a letter, bearing the postmark of the city, and addressed in one of those small, clear handwritings which seem naturally to belong to scholars and students. It was from Don Teodoro, and Veronica read it while she drank her tea and Elettra was making a fire in the next room.

The old priest did not refer to the strange story he had told her ten days earlier. But he recalled her question concerning the people at Muro and their condition. They were indeed desperately poor, he said, and the winter was a hard one in the mountains. There were many sick, and there was no hospital,—not so much as a room in which a dying beggar might lie out of the cold. It was a very pitiful tale, told carefully and accurately. And at the end the good man humbly begged that the most Excellent Princess would deign to allow his stipend to be paid in advance, in order that he might do something to help his poor.

Veronica read the letter twice, and judged it. Then she determined to do something at once, for she knew that the man had written the truth. She should have liked to send for him, and talk with him of what should be done; but she could not forget the things he had said about Bosio, and for that reason she did not wish to see him again—at least, not yet. His mind was unbalanced about that matter; but charity was a different thing.

His address in Naples was in the letter. She wrote a note in answer, begging him to tell her how much money he should need to hire a vacant house, since there was no time to build one, and to fit it decently with what he thought necessary, in order that it might serve as a refuge and hospital for the very poor. She sent Elettra with the letter.

It was raining again, and by good fortune Don Teodoro was at home, though it was still before noon. While the maid waited, he wrote his answer. His thanks were heartfelt on behalf of his parish, but shortly expressed. He said that in order to do what Veronica proposed so generously, at least two thousand francs would be necessary. He briefly explained why the charity would need what he looked upon as a large sum, and he begged pardon for being so frank.

Again Veronica read the letter carefully over, and she put it into the desk. Half an hour later she went to luncheon. The meal was as silent and gloomy as usual, and scarcely half a dozen words were said. Afterwards the three came back to the yellow drawing-room for their coffee. When the servant was gone, Veronica, stirring the sugar in her cup, turned to her uncle.

"Will you please give me three thousand francs, Uncle Gregorio?" she asked quietly. "I want it this afternoon, if you please."

Gregorio Macomer grew slowly white to the tips of his ears. Matilde sipped her coffee, and turned her back to the light.

"Three thousand francs!" repeated Macomer, slowly recovering a little self-control. "My dear child! What can you want of so much money?"

"Is it so very much?" asked Veronica, innocently surprised. "You have told me that I have

more than eight hundred thousand a year. It is for charity. The people at Muro have no hospital. I shall be glad if you will give it to me before four o'clock; I wish to send it at once."

Macomer had barely a thousand francs in the house, and he knew that there was not a man of business in Naples who would have lent him half the little sum for which Veronica was asking.

"I shall certainly not give you money for any such absurd purpose," said Gregorio, with sudden, assumed sternness.

Veronica raised her eyes in quiet astonishment, offended, but not disconcerted.

"Really, Uncle Gregorio," she said, "as I am of age and mistress of whatever is mine, I think I have a right to my little charities. Besides, you know, it is not giving, since you are no longer my guardian in reality. It is merely a case of sending to the bank for the money, if you have not got it in the house. I should like it before four o'clock, if you please, Uncle Gregorio."

In his terror the man lost his temper.

"I shall certainly not let you have it," he answered, with cold irritation. "It is absurd!"

If Veronica had wanted the money to spend it on herself, she might have waited until he was cool again, in the evening, before insisting. But her blood rose, for she felt that it was for her poor people, starving, sick, frozen, shelterless, in distant

Muro. She knew perfectly well what her rights were, and she asserted them then and there with a calm young dignity of purpose which terrified Gregorio more and more.

"This is very strange," she said. "I do not wish to say disagreeable things, Uncle Gregorio; we should both regret them. But you know that I am entitled to spend all my income as I please, and I must really beg you to get me this money at once. It is for a good purpose. The case is urgent. I am the proper judge of whether it is needed or not, and I have decided that I will give it. There is nothing more to be said."

"Except that I entirely refuse to listen to such words from my ward!" answered Gregorio, angrily.

"I appeal to you, Aunt Matilde," said Veronica, setting down her coffee cup upon the table and turning to the countess.

But Matilde knew well enough that her husband could not get the money. She shook her head gravely and said nothing.

By this time Veronica was thoroughly determined to have her way.

"Very well," she answered calmly. "I shall telegraph to the cardinal. I understand that he is in Rome."

Gregorio turned away, and he felt that his knees were shaking under him. He knew well enough what the result would be if the cardinal's suspicions

were aroused. Matilde saw the danger and interfered.

"I think you are pushing such a small matter to the verge of a quarrel, Gregorio," she said sweetly. "Since Veronica insists, you must give her the money. After all, it is hers, as she says."

Macomer turned and stared at his wife in amazement.

"I am going out at once," she continued. "If you like, I will go to the bank and get the money for you. Yes, dear," she added, turning to Veronica, "I shall be back before four o'clock, and you shall have it in plenty of time. Did you say four thousand or five thousand?"

"Only three," answered the young girl, rapidly pacified. "Three thousand, if you please. Thank you very much, Aunt Matilde! A woman always understands a woman in questions of charity. One wishes to act at once. Thank you."

And in order to end an unpleasant situation, she nodded and left the room. Husband and wife waited a moment after the door was closed. Then Matilde, before Gregorio could speak, went and opened it suddenly and looked out, but there was no one there.

"She would not listen at the door!" exclaimed Gregorio, with some contempt for his wife's caution.

"She? No! But I distrust that woman she has."

"And how do you propose to get this money?" asked the count.

"Have I no diamonds?" inquired Matilde. "She would have ruined us. Order the carriage, and I will go to a jeweller at once."

"Yes," said Macomer. "You are very wise. I thought there was going to be trouble. It was clever of you to restore her confidence by offering her more. But—" he lowered his voice—"something must be done at once."

"Yes," answered Matilde, looking behind her. "It shall be done at once."

He went out half an hour later, and before four o'clock Veronica despatched Elettra to Don Teodoro with three thousand francs in bank notes. But the diamonds which Matilde had left at the jeweller's were worth far more than that, and she had got more than that for them.

CHAPTER XIII.

VERONICA was well satisfied, and slept peacefully, dreaming of the pleasure she had given the old priest, and of the good which he could do with her money. And then in her dream, the scene of his first visit was acted over, and suddenly Veronica started up awake in the dark. She must have uttered an unconscious exclamation, just as she awoke, for in a moment the door opened and she heard Elettra's voice asking her if she needed anything, but in a tone so anxious and changed that it seemed to Veronica to belong to her dream rather than to any reality.

"Are you there?" she asked, in the darkness, surprised that the woman should have come in so unexpectedly.

"Yes," answered Elettra, briefly, and she groped for the matches on the little table beside the bed.

She struck a light and lit a candle. Veronica saw that her face was very pale, and that she was half dressed, wearing a black skirt and a white cotton jacket. As the young girl looked at her she realized how strange it was that she should have appeared at the slightest sound.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, with a little smile. "What time is it?" She looked at the watch, holding it up to the flame of the candle. "Three o'clock! What is the matter, Elettra? Why have you come?"

Elettra looked down, in real or pretended confusion.

"Excellency," she said in a humble tone, "my room is very cold and damp in this rainy weather. For some nights I have slept on the sofa in the dressing-room. I hope your Excellency will pardon me. And I heard you cry out, just now. Then, forgetting that I ought not to have been sleeping there, I got up and came."

"Oh! Did I cry out? Yes — I woke up suddenly. I was dreaming of Don Teodoro and of — " She checked herself. "Why did you not tell me that your room is damp? You shall have another."

"Excellency, if you will forgive me, it would give trouble at this time. If you will allow me to sleep on the sofa until the weather is fine again. I will make no noise. You have seen — in the morning no one would know it, and I am very well there."

Veronica looked at her and hesitated a moment. In the stillness she heard a soft sound.

"What is that?" she asked quickly.

"It is the cat," answered the maid, peering down below the level of the candle-light.

"It did not sound like the cat," said Veronica, pushing her dark, brown hair back with her slim hand, and looking down over the edge of the bed. "It was more like a footstep," she added, with a little laugh.

But at that moment she caught sight of the Maltese cat's green eyes in shadow. The creature came forward from the door, sprang instantly upon the foot of the bed and lay down, purring, its forepaws doubled under it, and its eyes shut.

"It is a heavy cat," said Elettra, thoughtfully. "It is so fat. One can hear it when it walks across the room."

She scratched its head gently, and it purred more loudly under her hand.

"Excellency, you will allow me to sleep in the dressing-room, just for these days," she said presently.

"Oh yes — if you like," answered Veronica, laying her head down upon the pillow, sleepy again.

The maid bent over her and drew the things up about her neck in a half-tender, motherly way, looking at the girl's face. Then she hesitated before putting out the light.

"Excellency," she said, "let us go to Muro. The air of this house is not good for you. It is damp, and you are pale in these days. In the mountains the colour will come back. The people will make a feast when you come. It will amuse *you*. Excellency, let us go."

Veronica laughed sleepily.

"You are dreaming, Elettra. Go away. I want to go to sleep."

The woman sighed softly, extinguished the light, and groped her way to the door in the dark. Veronica was very sleepy, as she said, but somehow after her maid had gone away, she became wakeful again for a time. The cat had remained on the foot of the bed, and its soft purring disturbed her a little, because she was accustomed to absolute silence. There had been a curious cross-fitting of her dream and of the little realities of Elettra's entrance. She had dreamt over again the priest's earnest warning that her life was in danger, and she had imagined that she heard a footstep of a person coming up quickly behind her. Then, somehow, in the same instant, recalling what Don Teodoro had told her about her uncle's frauds, she had seemed to know that he had refused the money in the afternoon because there was no more to take, nor to be given to her. Waking suddenly, she had heard Elettra's anxious voice, giving the strong impression that she was really in present peril. Then she had really thought that she heard another footstep, somewhere, while Elettra was standing still beside her. It had only been the cat, of course. It was such a very fat cat, as Elettra said, and the floors were of the old-fashioned sort, laid on wooden beams, and trembled very easily, as they

do in old Italian houses. But each detail had fitted with another, into a sort of whole which was a reflexion of the priest's story. Some of it all at once looked true, and instead of going to sleep at once, Veronica's eyes were wide open, and she turned uneasily on her pillow.

Of course, it was absurd, for she had received the money when she had insisted upon having it, and if Elettra's room was damp, that quite explained her presence. Besides, Elettra could not be supposed to know what Don Teodoro had said to Veronica. And then, there was the rest of the story, all that connected Bosio and Matilde. She absolutely refused to think of believing that. She would not even admit that there might have been some little foundation for it in the past.

Instinctively driving away the thought, she began to say certain prayers for the poor man, and little by little, repeating the words often, her mind grew calm, and she fell asleep once more. Yet in her sleep the needle of doubt ran through the little bits of memories, one by one, threading them in one continuous string. There was Bianca Corleone's look of blank surprise when Veronica had first spoken of a possible marriage with Bosio, and there was Taquisara's bold assertion, tallying with the priest's, that the Macomer wanted her fortune, and there was very vividly before her the gnawing anxiety she had seen in Matilde's face

until the latter had caught sight of the artificial flower on that memorable evening. And the string on which the beads of memory were threaded was her long-repressed but profound distrust of Gregorio Macomer. It had seemed a wicked prejudice, a gratuitously false judgment, based upon something in his face, and she had always fought against it as unworthy, besides being irrational. Then, too, there was the will she had signed a fortnight since, for the sake of peace. If there was nothing in what the priest had said, why had they been so terribly anxious to get the document executed without delay? It was scarcely natural. And there were fifty other details, turns of phrases, changes of expression, little words of Gregorio's spoken in an enigmatic tone to his wife, which Veronica had not understood, but which she had therefore remembered, and which could mean that he was on the verge of ruin, and in great trouble of mind about his affairs. Amidst the wildly shifting scenery of dreams, the little doll figures of abiding facts out of memory joined hands in procession, showing their faces one by one and their likeness to one another more and more clearly. Even in her dream, it flashed upon her that it might all be true except that one part of it which said that Bosio had loved Matilde and not herself. That was not true. He had loved her, Veronica; they had known it, and had taken advantage of it.

She did not blame them for that. She had been so fond of him, — she knew that she should soon have loved him, — and the dream swung back upon itself, and she was again standing beside the fire in the yellow room, with him so near to her. And after she awoke, she shed tears.

On that morning, after eleven o'clock, Matilde came to Veronica's room, bringing a piece of needlework with her, and she sat down to stay a while. They talked idly about dull subjects, and from time to time Matilde looked up and smiled sadly. She sat so that she could not see Bosio's photograph on the mantelpiece. After she had been there half an hour, she started, suddenly remembering something.

"I have done such a stupid thing!" she exclaimed, with an expression of annoyance. "I believe I am losing my memory!"

"What is it?" asked Veronica, naturally.

"I sent my maid out, just before I came to you, with a number of errands to do, and I forgot two things that I wanted very much. There was some medicine which I was to take before luncheon, and some jet beads that I needed. I do not care so much about the beads, but I need the medicine. I feel so horribly tired and weak, all the time."

"Send one of the men," suggested Veronica.

"A man could not buy jet things," objected Matilde. "You could not let Elettra go out for me,

could you? It is a fine morning, for a wonder, and she need not be gone more than half an hour."

"Certainly," answered Veronica, promptly. "She has nothing to do, and the walk will be good for her."

She rose and rang for her maid.

"I will go and get the recipe," said Matilde, rising, too. "It is an old one, given me by our poor doctor who died last year, and I kept it because it did me so much good. They will make it up in ten minutes. She can go and buy the jet, and stop for it on the way back. Will you tell her that she may go?"

Elettra had entered the room, and Veronica explained to her what she was to do.

"Put on your hat, Elettra," said Matilde, "and then please come to my room, and I will give you the recipe. I must find it among my things. I will be back presently, dear," she said to Veronica.

She went out, followed by the maid, who did as she was bidden and then went to Matilde's room. The countess explained exactly what sort of jet she wanted, and then gave her the recipe.

"Tell the chemist that this is only for two doses," she said, "but that I wish him to make up twenty doses, because I am going to take it regularly. Say that it is for me, and go to Casadio for it, where we get everything. Have it put down on the bill. Do you understand? Here are twenty

francs for the jet, but you will not need so much. You understand, do you?"

"Yes, Excellency."

Elettra stuck the little slip of paper, on which the recipe was written, into her shabby pocketbook without looking at it. She could read and write fairly well, and had been used to helping her husband the under-steward with his accounts at Muro, but even if she had looked at the recipe she would have understood nothing of the doctor's hieroglyphics and abbreviated Latin words. The prescription was for a preparation of arsenic, which Matilde had formerly taken for some time. The chemist would not make any difficulty about preparing twenty doses of it for the Countess Macomer, though the whole quantity of arsenic contained in so many would probably be sufficient to kill one not accustomed to the medicine, if taken all at once.

But though Matilde was so anxious to have the stuff before luncheon, she had a number of doses of it put away in a drawer, which she took out and counted, after Elettra had gone. She opened one of the little folded papers and looked at the fine white powder it contained, took a little on the end of her finger and tasted it. Then, from the same drawer, she took a package done up in coarser paper, and opened it likewise, looked at it, smelt it, and touched it with the tip of her tongue very cautiously indeed. It was white, too, but coarser

than the medicine. She was very careful in tasting it, and she immediately rinsed her mouth with water, before she tied up the package again, shut the drawer, and put the key into her pocket.

By and by Elettra came back and brought her the jet and the medicine, returning her the change without any remark. Matilde thanked her, and laid the package of twenty doses upon her dressing-table, before the mirror.

At luncheon, she persuaded Veronica to go out with her for a drive in the afternoon. She said that she felt ill and tired, and did not like to go alone. Gregorio said that he was too busy to accompany her, and it would not have been easy for Veronica to refuse. While it was still early, they drove out, past Bianca Corleone's house, over the hill, and down to Posilippo, on the other side. They talked very little, but Veronica enjoyed the bright afternoon air, after the long spell of bad weather. There was no dust, for the road was not yet dry, and a gentle land breeze just roughed the surface of the calm sea to a deeper blue. When they turned to drive home, there was already a purple mist about Vesuvius, and the great Sant' Angelo's crest was black against the sky, for these were the shortest days, and the sun set far to southward. It was almost dark when they got back to the city.

"Shall we have tea in your room?" asked Ma-

tilde as they went up the stairs together. "It is so dreary in the drawing-room."

"Certainly," answered Veronica, readily. "Yes — the rest of the house is horribly gloomy, now."

Matilde was behind her on the stairs, evidently fatigued, but as the young girl spoke, a look of detestation flashed across her worn face. She hated Veronica, now that Bosio was dead. But for Veronica, Bosio would still have been alive. There was more than the mere desperate determination to save herself, and her husband with her, in what Matilde did after that. But when they entered the hall, the look was quite gone from her face. She had been very gentle, all that morning and afternoon. They had talked a little of the incident that had occurred on the previous day, of Gregorio's feeling about not letting Veronica spend money uselessly. He was so conscientious, Matilde had said. Though the guardianship had expired, he still felt it his duty to watch his former ward's expenditure. And he was not charitable — no, it had always been a cause of regret to Matilde that Gregorio, with all his good qualities, was hard to poor people. Bosio had been different. Ah — poor Bosio!

She spoke gently, and sometimes there was a true ring in her voice which Veronica heard and understood, for it was quite genuine. And now, she seemed tired and weak — she who was so strong.

So they went to Veronica's room, and Elettra brought the tea things, and Matilde made tea, and they both drank it, and talked a little more, and gave the Maltese cat milk in a saucer, on the lower shelf of the little two-storied tea-table.

Afterwards, Matilde went away to her room, and Veronica remained alone after Elettra had taken away the things.

Before dinner, Elettra came and told her mistress that the countess was suddenly taken very ill, and was crying aloud with the pain she suffered. Veronica hastily went to her aunt, and found that a doctor had already come and was making her swallow olive oil out of a full tumbler. A servant followed her into the room with a plate full of raw eggs, and the doctor was asking for magnesia. Gregorio Macomer was standing by, shaking his head, and occasionally supporting his wife with one hand, when her strength seemed to be failing. Veronica took the other side, and the doctor stood before the sick woman.

"What is it, Doctor?" asked Veronica, after a moment. "What is the matter with her?"

The physician looked over his shoulder and saw that there was no servant in the room. "It is arsenic," he answered in a low voice. "She has been poisoned. But there was not enough to kill her — she will be quite well to-morrow."

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Veronica, in horrified

surprise. "By whom?" She looked at Gregorio, addressing the question to him.

He gravely raised his high shoulders and shook his head. Veronica expected to hear his awful laugh; but though his face twitched nervously, it did not come. He knew that the doctor might afterwards be an excellent witness to his peculiarities, in case he wished to prove himself insane; but on the other hand, had he shown any signs of insanity now, the doctor might have suspected him of having poisoned his wife. That would have been very unfortunate.

As the physician had foreseen, Matilde was soon better, and by bed-time she felt no ill effects from what had happened to her, beyond great weakness and lassitude. The doctor had asked many questions and had elicited the fact that Matilde had a preparation of arsenic in powders, which she took according to prescription, and which she showed him after the first spasms were passed. She assured him, however, that she had only taken one on that day, and had taken it just before luncheon. The rest of the powders were intact and still lay upon her toilet table. She showed them also. He took the next one, on the top of the pile, and said that he would examine it and ascertain whether the chemist had made any mistake. Then he went away, promising to come in the morning.

At last Matilde was alone with her husband.

Veronica had gone to bed, and Gregorio waited for an opportunity of questioning his wife.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked, sitting down by her bedside.

"No one," she answered. "I took it on purpose. You need not be anxious. I pretended to suffer more than I did, and I do not mind the pain at all."

He stared at her, trying to fathom her thoughts, but he altogether failed to understand her.

"Why did you do it?" he asked, drawing the lids close together over his small eyes.

"You are so dull!" she answered. "You shall see. I cannot explain now. I have been really poisoned and I feel ill and weak. Do not go out to-morrow before I see you."

He left her, but she did not sleep all night. In spite of what she had gone through on that evening and of all the mental suffering of many days, she was stronger still than any one knew. It was between two and three in the morning when she lighted a candle, wrapped herself in a dressing-gown and began to make certain preparations for the day.

In the first place she locked both her doors very softly, and arranged a stocking over each keyhole, twisting it round the keys themselves. Then she got some stiff writing-paper, and a heavy ivory paper-knife, and from the locked drawers she took

that other package which was done up in coarse paper.

From this she took some of the rough, half-pulverized white stuff, laid it upon the marble top of the chest of drawers, and with the ivory paper-knife, pressing heavily, she little by little crushed it as fine as dust.

She then took nine of the eighteen little papers containing the arsenic, which were left, opened each one at the end and poured out the contents apart, into a little heap quite separate from the other. And of the other, she took a pinch for each little paper and dropped it in — about as much in quantity as she had taken out. Then she closed each of the papers, carefully slipping one folded end into the other as chemists do; when they were all closed, she made a tiny hole in each with the point of a needle, so that she should know the bad from the good, if necessary. This was only a precaution, and could do no harm. Then she arranged the good and the bad in their little packages of five, each in a tiny india-rubber band, laying bad ones and good ones alternately. When this was done, she put all the packages into the original paper, loosely opened, and laid them once more before her looking-glass, upon the toilet table. Her large white hands were exceedingly skilful, and it would have needed sharp eyes to see that the papers of medicine had been tampered with.

After this she cut a sheet of the writing-paper into four square pieces, and very neatly made out of three of them three very small open boxes, for moulds, each of the size of a large lump of sugar, and she set them up side by side in a row. One was larger than the other two.

They had brought her powdered sugar, with the juice of a lemon in a glass and a decanter of water; she had said that if she were thirsty she would make herself a glass of lemonade in the night. She had also a bottle of ordinary sticking gum.

She took the sugar and mixed a very little with some of the stuff she had pulverized, and with a few drops of the gum, till it was a stiff, hard paste, and with the end of the paper-knife she carefully filled the largest of her three moulds with it. She was sure that it would be dry and hard by the next day, and it would have the size, the appearance, and somewhat the taste of a lump of sugar.

Then she halved the little heap of arsenic medicine as exactly as she could. There were nine powders in all. To produce the symptoms of poisoning in herself, she had taken four from her old supply, that evening. Half of nine would be four and a half, and that would not be too much. She mixed enough wet sugar and gum with each little pile to fill one of each of the smaller moulds, pressing the sticky mass firmly into the paper.

When all was finished, she carefully cleaned the

marble top of the chest of drawers, and threw what little of the coarser powder remained into the ashes of the fire, in which a few coals still glowed. The heat would consume the powder immediately.

Having done this, she set the three little moulds on the warm marble hearthstone to dry, took the remainder of the package of coarser powder, twisted the stiff paper closely, so that it should not open, took the stockings from the keyholes, and, candle in hand, left the room, locking the door softly behind her. She made no noise as she traversed the dim rooms, in her felt slippers; but she avoided the yellow drawing-room and passed through a passage behind it. Her nerves were singularly good, but since Bosio's death she did not like to be alone in that room at night. Bosio had been fond of dabbling in spiritism and such things, and they had often talked about the possibility of coming back after death, in that very room, promising each other that, if it were possible, the one who died first would try to communicate with the other. Matilde turned aside from the room in which they had said those things to each other.

She walked more and more cautiously as she came to the other end of the long apartment, where Veronica lived, and she stopped in a dark corridor before the door of Elettra's room. It was not ajar this time, but closed. Matilde did not hesitate, and began to turn the handle very slowly.

Then she pushed the door and looked in, shading her candle with her hand, from her eyes, so as to look over it. She had determined, if she found the woman in bed, to wake her boldly, to say that she felt ill again and to tell her to go and heat some water. That would have taken some time. But Elettra was not there, and the bed, as usual of late, was untouched.

Matilde looked about her hastily, at the same time extracting the package from the wide pocket of her dressing-gown. The furniture was scant and simple — the bed, a table covered with things belonging to Veronica, beside which lay sewing-materials, two chairs, a shabby chest of drawers, a deal washstand — that was all. Italian servants are not accustomed to very luxurious quarters. A couple of coarse, uncoloured prints of saints were tacked to the wall over the bed, and a bit of a dusty olive branch, from the last Palm Sunday, nine months ago, was stuck behind one of them.

Matilde looked about her, and hesitated a moment. Then, setting the candlestick down, she knelt upon the floor, and thrust the package as far as she could under the chest of drawers. Of all the things she had to do, in the course of that night and the following day, this was the only one with which any danger was connected, for at any moment Elettra might have come from Veronica's room to her own. The thing was possible, but not

probable, between three and four o'clock in the morning. It did not happen, and when Matilde left the room and softly closed the door behind her, all was safe.

Before she went to bed, she entered the dining-room, poured herself out a glass of strong Sicilian wine from a decanter on the sideboard and drank it at a draught, for she was very tired. She left the decanter and the glass on the table, so that any one might see them. If by any remote possibility some wakeful person had chanced to hear her moving about in the night, she would say that she had felt ill, and had left her room in order to find the stimulant. She thought of every possible detail which could in any way hereafter be brought up in evidence.

At last she went back to her room, unlocked the door, and locked herself in.

Her plan was simple, though the details of it were complicated, so far as the preparation was concerned. It was an extremely bold plan, but one not at all likely to fail in the execution. Almost all the difficulty had lain in the preparations, and she had spared no pains and no suffering for herself, in the preliminaries.

She knew the story of Elettra's husband very well, and of how he had been murdered by peasants near Muro in trying to collect the exorbitant rents Macomer had attempted to exact. She was

a good enough judge of character to see that Elettra had the revengeful disposition common to many of the southern hill people, and the woman's dark complexion, sombre eyes, and thin frame would all help to strengthen the impression in the mind of an unprejudiced judge.

She intended to make it appear that Elettra had poisoned the whole family, beginning with Matilde herself, out of revenge for her dead husband. Veronica was to die, but Gregorio and Matilde herself would only suffer a certain amount of pain for a few hours, and then recover. She had begun by half poisoning herself, both to remove all suspicion, and as a sort of experiment, to be sure that she was giving herself and her husband a sufficient amount to produce the real symptoms of poisoning by arsenic. No half measures, no mere acting, would be of any avail.

The stuff in the package wrapped in coarse paper was an almost pure salt of arsenic, sold by grocers as rat-poison.

The two small lumps of sugar and arsenic medicine were for herself and her husband; the large lump of almost pure poison was for Veronica.

In the examination which would follow upon the deed, the package of rat-poison would be found under the chest of drawers in the maid's room, half empty. It would be discovered that every alternate paper of Matilde's medicine had

been tampered with, and it would be supposed that Matilde had at the first time taken one of those containing poison, whereas the doctor who had attended her had taken the next, which was untouched and only had medicine in it.

She intended to make tea on the following afternoon in Veronica's room. She could easily find an excuse for bringing in Gregorio who, like many modern Italians, had acquired the habit of drinking tea every day. She herself would make the tea, and put in the sugar and cream. Elettra would, as usual, have brought in the tea-tray with the silver urn, for Veronica always preferred being served by her maid when she had anything in her own room. It would go hard, if Matilde could not divert Veronica's attention for one moment while she dropped the lumps into the cups, having concealed them in her handkerchief beforehand. There would be no servant in the room, for Elettra would have gone out. Gregorio would know beforehand what was to be done and would help to divert Veronica at the right moment. Arsenic had little or no taste, and Veronica would drink her cup readily like the rest.

She would die before the next morning. That was certain. Everything would tend to throw the suspicion of having attempted to commit a horrible wholesale murder, upon Elettra. The will could be kept back until the first uproar and excitement

should be over. Then Matilde would have the fortune, Gregorio would be saved, and Elettra would be condemned to penal servitude for life.

It was certainly a very bold plan, and Matilde did not see where it could fail.

CHAPTER XIV.

MATILDE received on the following morning a curious letter which surprised and startled her. She had risen at last, grey and weary of face, with heavy eyes and drawn lips, to face the deed she meant to do. The sky was overcast, but it was not raining yet, though it soon would. She had risen before ringing for her maid, and had carefully removed the paper from the three little cakes of white stuff which she had made. It had to be done cleverly, for the smaller ones seemed likely to crumble; but the large one was quite consistent. She had hidden them all in the drawer she kept locked; then she had unfastened her door and had rung the bell. It was past nine o'clock, and her maid had brought her a letter with her coffee.

It was very short, but the few words it contained were exceedingly disquieting. It was accompanied by a card on which Matilde read 'Giuditta Astarita, Sonnambula,' and the address was below, in one corner. The few words of the letter, written in a subtle, sloping, feminine handwriting, correctly spelt and grammatically well expressed, ran as follows: —

"The spirit of B. M. wishes to make you an important communication and torments me continually. I pray you to come to me soon, on any day between ten and three o'clock. In order that you may be assured that it is really the spirit of B. M., and not a deceiving spirit, I am to remind you that on the evening of the ninth of this month, when you and he were alone together in a room which is all yellow, you laid your hand upon his head and stroked his hair and said: 'It is to save me.' The spirit tells me that you will remember this and understand it, and know that he is not a deceiving spirit."

Matilde read the short letter many times over, and her hands trembled when she at last folded it and returned it to its envelope. A sensation of curiosity and of ghastly horror ran through her hair, more than once, like a cool breeze, and with it came the infinite desire for some one word of truth out of the black beyond, from the one being whom she had loved so fiercely.

But in such things she was sceptical, and she sought to make some theory which should explain the writer of the letter into a common impostor. She could find none. She remembered the act and the words that had gone with it. Only she and Bosio had known, and he was dead — he had died four-and-twenty hours after she had touched his hair and had said: 'It is to save me.' And she

knew him well. He was not, under any circumstances, a man to speak of such things to a third person. Then, how did this Giuditta Astarita know what Matilde had said and done? It was not natural, and not natural meant supernatural—supernatural meant the possibility of communication, and she had loved the dead man with all her big, sinful soul.

It would be long before the time came for the deed, in the late afternoon, and the terrible day must be disposed of in some way or other. She was not afraid of going mad, nor of losing her nerve, nor of making a mistake at the last moment, but even to her courage and strength the hours before her were hours of fear.

She planned her day. The doctor would come, in the first place, at about ten o'clock. He would recommend her to be quiet, to take a little broth for luncheon, and a little more broth for dinner. She smiled grimly, as she thought of his probable instructions, and she knew what she could do and bear at pinch of pressing need. He would also tell her that the powder contained only just the right quantity of medicine, and that she must have been poisoned in some other way. She knew that.

Afterwards, Gregorio would need his instructions. He was to be at home in the afternoon, and to come and drink his tea in Veronica's room when Matilde sent for him. Just when Matilde was pouring out

the tea, he was to distract Veronica's attention from the tea-table for a moment. She would not tell him that she intended to half poison him, too, for he was a coward, and at the last minute, dreading pain, he would not drink from his cup. She knew that well enough. She would tell him when he began to suffer the effects, and assure him that he was not going to die. Again she smiled grimly, and chancing to be just then before the mirror, she saw that her face had all at once grown old since yesterday. And in spite of her strength of body and will, she felt weak and exhausted, and hated the hours that were to be between.

But when she had spoken to Gregorio, she would go out alone, on foot. And she knew that she should find the address given on Giuditta Astarita's card, and enter the house and see the woman who had written to her, and hear the message that was promised. If she left her own house, her feet must take her that way, whether she would or not.

And so it all happened just as she foresaw. But she had not known that in threading the intricate, dark streets she would almost forget what she was to do that day, in the mad hope of the one more word from beyond. She had not known that at the thought her eyes would brighten eagerly, the colour would come back to her cheeks, and the strength to her limbs as she walked. After all, the strongest thing that had ever been in her, or ever could be,

was that passionate, dominating, despotic devotion to one being; and the merest suggestion that he might not be gone quite beyond the reach of spiritual touch had power to veil the awful future of the day, when her hand was already uplifted to kill. She was not a woman to hesitate at the last moment, unstrung and womanishly trembling because the victim was young, and smiled, and had innocent eyes. And yet, perhaps, had she not gone that day to answer the spirit-seer's summons and to catch at the straw thrown to her from beyond the grave, she might have seen a reason for changing her mind, and all might have happened very differently. But Fate does not sleep, though she seems sometimes to nod and forget to kill.

Matilde came to the house as the clock struck eleven, and entered by the dark, arched door, and went up the damp, stone steps, as Bosio had done a fortnight earlier. She was admitted by the decent woman whose one eye was of a china blue, and she waited for Giuditta in the same small sitting-room, of which the one heavily curtained window looked out upon an inner court. She did not know that Bosio had ever been there, but in her thoughts of him she felt his presence, and turned, with a shiver under her hair, to look behind her as she stood waiting before the window, just where he had stood. The day was dark, and the room was all dim and cold, with its stiff, ugly furniture and its

bare, tiled floor. The corners were shadowy, and her eyes searched in them uneasily, and she would not turn her back upon them again and look out of the windows. Then the door opened noiselessly, and Giuditta Astarita entered, in her loose black silk gown, with her little bunch of charms against the evil eye, hanging by a chain from a button hole.

The china blue eyes looked steadily at Matilde, out of the unhealthy face, but the woman gave no sign to show that she knew who her visitor was. Her hoarse voice pronounced the usual words: "You wish to consult me?"

"You wrote to me. I am the Countess Macomer," answered Matilde, lifting her veil, which was a thick one.

The expression in the woman's eyes did not change, but she still looked steadily at Matilde for three or four seconds.

"Yes," she said. "I thought so. I am glad that you have come, for I have suffered much on your account."

She looked as though she were suffering, Matilde thought. Then she placed the chairs, made the countess sit down, and drew the curtains, just as she had done for Bosio.

Then, in the dark, there was silence. It seemed to Matilde a long time, and she grew nervous, and moved uneasily. Then, without warning, she heard

that other voice, clear, deep, and bell-like, which Bosio had heard, and she trembled.

"I see a name written on your breast, — Bosio Macomer."

The darkness, the voice, the shiver of anticipation, unnerved the strong woman.

"What does he say to me?" she asked unsteadily.

Again there was a long silence, longer than the first, and by many degrees more disturbing to Matilda, as she waited for the answer.

"Bosio loves you," said the voice. "He is watching over you. He tells you to remember what you promised each other in the room that is all yellow, long ago, — that the one that should die first would visit the other. He tells you that it is possible, and that he has kept his promise. He loves you always, and you will be spirits together."

Matilde felt that in the darkness she was horribly pale, but she was no longer frightened.

"Will he come to me when I am alone?" she asked, and her voice did not shake.

"I will ask him," answered the clear voice, and again there was silence, but only for a few seconds. "This is his answer," continued the voice. "He cannot come to you when you are alone, as yet. By and by he will come. But he watches over you. For the present he can only speak with you through Giuditta Astarita, who is now asleep."

"Is she asleep?" asked Matilde.

"She is in a trance," the voice replied. "I speak through her, but when she awakes, she will not know what I have said. The spirits come to her directly sometimes, when she is awake, and they torment her. Bosio has been coming to her often, and has made her suffer, until she wrote to you. The spirits themselves suffer when they wish to communicate with the living, and cannot."

"What are you?" inquired Matilda.

"I am Giuditta's familiar. The spirits generally speak, through me, to her, when she is in the trance."

"And she knows nothing of what you say?"

"Nothing, after she is awake."

"Is Bosio suffering now?" asked Matilde, gravely but eagerly, after a moment's pause.

"I will ask him." And another brief pause followed. "Yes," continued the voice. "He is suffering because he has left you. He suffers remorse. He cannot be happy unless he can communicate with you."

"Can you see him? Can you see his face?"

"Yes," replied the voice, without hesitation. "He is very pale. His hair is soft, brown, and silky, with a few grey streaks in it. His eyes are gentle and tender, and his beard is like his hair, soft and like silk. He is as you last saw him alive, when you kissed him by the fireplace in the room that is yellow, just before he died. He loves you, as he did then."

Such evidence of unnatural knowledge might have convinced a more sceptical mind than Matilde's of the fact that the somnambulist could at least read her thoughts and memories from her mind as from a book. It was impossible that any one but herself could know how, and in what room, she had kissed him for the last time, a few minutes before his end. Again the cold shiver ran under her hair, and she could not speak again for a few moments.

"Does he know what I am going to do to-day?" she asked at last, in a very low voice.

"I will ask him."

The silence which followed was the longest of all that there had been.

"I cannot see him any more," said the voice, speaking more faintly. "He is gone. He will communicate with you again. I cannot find him. Giuditta is tired — she will —" The last words were hardly audible, and the voice died away altogether.

In the dark, Matilde heard something like a yawn, as of a person waking from sleep. Then Giuditta's croaking voice spoke to her.

"I am tired," she said. "The spirits have kept me a long time. Did you hear anything that you wished to hear?"

"Yes. I heard much."

While Matilde was speaking, the woman drew the curtain back, and the dull steel light of the

gloomy day filled the small room. But after the darkness it was almost dazzling. Matilde looked at Giuditta's face, and saw the same staring, china eyes, and the same listless expression in the unhealthy features. She had felt a sensation of relief when the voice had been unable to answer the last question she had asked; for she still thought that there might be a doubt as to Giuditta's total forgetfulness on waking. But that doubt was greatly diminished by the woman's indifferent and weary look.

"I hope that he will not torment me so much after this," said Giuditta. "I have lost my sleep for several nights."

Matilde, believing that the somnambulist was one person when awake and quite another when asleep, did not care to enter into conversation with her in her present state. The vivid, terrible future of the day returned to her mind, too. She had been momentarily unstrung and was in haste to be gone and to be alone. She had her purse in her hand, and stood still a moment, hesitating.

"I generally ask twenty-five francs for a consultation," said Giuditta. "But I am so much obliged to you for coming to free me from this obsession, that I shall not charge anything to-day."

"No," answered Matilde, quietly. "I am not accustomed to receiving anything without paying for it. But I thank you."

She laid the money upon the polished table, beside the volumes in their gilt bindings.

"Very well," said Giuditta. "If you desire it, I thank you. If you should wish to come again, I am always to be found between ten and three o'clock."

"I will come again," answered Matilde.

She passed through the door while Giuditta held it open for her, and in the passage she was met by the one-eyed woman. But she was more unnerved and less observant than Bosio had been, and she did not notice the extraordinary resemblance between the colour of the woman's one eye and that of Giuditta's two. She descended the stairs slowly, feeling dizzy at the turnings, but steadying herself as she went down each straight flight. She made her way quickly to the nearest large thoroughfare and took the first passing cab to get home, for she felt that she had not strength left to walk much more on that day.

She had a moment of weakness and doubt, as she went up her own stairs, knowing that in half an hour she must sit down to table with Gregorio and with Veronica. It would be the last time, for Veronica would never sit down with them again. She had not realized exactly how it was to be. Henceforth, at that table, two places were to be vacant, of two persons dead within a fortnight, the one by his own hand, the other by hers; and from

that day, when she and her husband sat there, the shadows of those two would be between them always.

She paused on the staircase, and steadied herself with her hand against the wall. She knew that from now until it was done, she should have no moment in which she could allow herself the pitiful luxury of feeling weak. And as she stood there, and thought of the strange messages she had but now received from beyond the grave, she felt the terror of what the dead man's spirit might say to her when all was done, and Veronica lay dead in her own room upstairs — in this coming night.

The fear followed her up the steps like a living thing, its hand on her shoulder, its cold lips close to her ears, breathing fright and whispering terror. And it went in with her to her own room, and kept freezing company with her throughout a long half-hour of mental agony. It could not bend her, but it almost broke her. If she could stand and walk and see, she would go to Veronica's room that afternoon and kill her. She hated her, too. She hated her all the more bitterly because she felt afraid to kill her, and knew that she must conquer her fear before she could do it. She hated her most savagely because, but for her, Bosio Macomer would still have been alive. As though she had been herself about to die, the great pictures of her own past rose in fierce colours, and faced her with vivid life in

the very midst of death. And with them came the clear echo of that bell-like voice she had heard speaking message for message between her and the man she had lost.

Her soul was not in the balance, for the die was cast and the deed was to be done. But she suffered then, as though she had still been free to choose. She was not. The atrocious vision of an infamous disgrace stood between her and all possibility of relenting. She saw again the coarse striped clothes, the cropped hair, the hands and feet shackled in irons, the hideous faces of women murderers and thieves around her. Well, that was the alternative, if she let Veronica live — all that, or death.

Of course, in such a case she would have chosen death. But it was characteristic of her that from beginning to end she never thought of taking her own life. She was too vital by nature. She had loved life long and well; she loved it even now that it was not worth living. She never even asked herself the question, whether it would not be better and easier to end all and leave Gregorio to his fate. Gregorio! Her smooth lip curled in contempt. A coward, a thief, a fool — why should she care what became of him? Coldly and sincerely she wished that she were going to kill him, and not Veronica. She despised the one, and hated the other; of the two, she would rather have let the hated one live. But to die herself seemed absurd to her, because

she really feared death with all her heart, and clung to life with all her strong, vital nature. If the lives of all Naples could have saved her own, death should have had them all, rather than take hers. To live was a passion of itself — even to live lonely, with a despicable and hated companion in the consciousness of the enormous and irrevocable crime by which that living was to be secured to her.

There was a common, straight-backed chair in the room, between the chest of drawers and the wall. Through that interminable half-hour she sat upright upon it, her hands folded upon her knees, quite cold and motionless, her eyes closed, and her lips parted in an expression of bodily pain. Then she rose suddenly, all straight at once, tall and unbending, and stood still while one might have counted ten, and she opened and shut her eyes slowly, two or three times, as though she were comparing the outer world with that within her. So Clytemnestra might have stood, before she laid her hands to the axe.

She did not mean to be alone again until all was over. It would be easier then. She would have her own bodily pain to bear. There would be confusion in the house — doctors — screaming women — trembling men-servants — her husband's groans; for he was a coward, and would bear ill the little suffering which would help to save him. Then

they would tell her that Veronica was dead; and then — then she could sleep for hours, nights, days, calmly, and at rest.

She bathed her tired face in cold water, and went to face them at luncheon. With iron will, she ate and drank and talked, bearing herself bravely, as some great actresses have acted out their parts, while death waited for them at the stage door.

Had the weather been fine, she would have persuaded Veronica to drive with her, as on the previous day. But it was dark and gloomy, and there would be rain before night. She talked with the young girl, and began to make plans with her for going away. Gregorio ate nothing, and looked on, uttering a monosyllable now and then, and laughing frantically, two or three times. Nobody paid any attention to his laughter, now, for the household had grown used to it. It might break out just when a servant was handing him something; the man would merely draw back a step, and wait until the count was quiet again, before offering the dish.

Over their coffee, Matilde read fragments of news from the day's paper, and made comments on what was happening in the world. Veronica thought her unnaturally talkative and excited, but put it down to the reaction after the poisoning of the previous night. Matilde drank two cups of coffee instead of one. Macomer smoked one ciga-

rette after another, and sent for a sweet liqueur, of which he swallowed two glasses. He did not look at Veronica, when he could avoid doing so.

At last Matilde rose and asked Veronica to allow her to bring her work and sit with her in her room, to which the young girl of course assented.

"By and by, we will have tea there," said Matilde. "Perhaps you will let your uncle come and have a cup with us — he always drinks tea in the afternoon."

"Certainly," answered Veronica, quietly. "Will you come at four o'clock, Uncle Gregorio? Or is that too early?"

"Thank you. I will come at four, my dear," said Gregorio; and Matilde saw that his knees shook as he moved.

In Veronica's room the two women sat through the early part of the afternoon, and still Matilde talked almost continuously. That was the only outward sign that she was not in her usual state, and Veronica scarcely noticed it, for as the time wore on, she spoke less excitedly, and more often waited for an answer to what she said. Of course, the conversation turned for some time upon what had occurred on the preceding evening. Matilde scouted the idea that any one had attempted to poison her. It was perfectly clear, she said, that, although the paper which the doctor had carried away to examine only contained exactly the right

amount of medicine, the one from which Matilda had taken her dose must have had too much in it. She was quite out of the habit of taking arsenic, too, and a very slight overdose would always produce the symptoms of poisoning. Veronica could see that she had felt no serious ill effects from the accident. As for thinking that any one had given her poison intentionally, it was utterly and entirely absurd. Matilde refused to entertain the idea even for a moment, and presently she went on to speak of other things, and soon fell back upon making plans for the winter. She did not allow the conversation to flag, for she feared lest Veronica should be tired of sitting in her room and suddenly propose to go somewhere else, just for the sake of the change. It was essential to Matilde's plan that Elettra should bring the things for tea.

She did not allow herself to think, and she succeeded in staving off silence. Now that the deed was so near, it seemed unreal. Once she touched her handkerchief in her pocket, and felt the three prepared lumps concealed in it, to assure herself that she was not imagining all she had done, and meant to do. Then, suddenly, she felt that her brow was moist, a thing she could hardly remember having noticed before in her life. But the moisture disappeared almost instantly, and her skin was dry and burning.

Then the time came, and it was four o'clock.

Elettra opened the door and brought in the tea things on a large silver tray, set them down, and went to get the little tea-table, that was made with a shelf below, between the four legs, as a table with two stories.

"Let me make it," said Matilde, cheerfully; "I like to do it."

She laid down her work, and Elettra set the table before her knees, with its high silver urn, and all the necessary little implements. Veronica found herself on the other side of it, for Matilde had carefully chosen her seat when she had first come, placing herself in such a way with regard to Veronica as to make the present result almost inevitable unless the girl moved into a very inconvenient position.

The big grey Maltese cat came in through the still open door, in the hope of cream at the tea hour, as usual. The creature rubbed itself along Elettra's skirt while she was lighting the spirit lamp under the urn, which contained water already almost boiling.

"Will you kindly call the count?" said Matilde, addressing the maid.

Elettra left the room, and Matilde settled herself to make the tea, as women do, raising her elbow a little on each side and then dropping them again, bending her face down to see whether the lamp were burning well, opening the teapot, pouring a

little hot water into it, opening and shutting the tea-caddy, and settling each spoon in each saucer in a dainty and utterly futile way.

The cat rubbed its grey sides against Veronica's skirt and against her little slipper, as she sat there, one knee crossed over the other. The young girl bent down and stroked it, and hesitated, looking at the tea-table, and not wishing to disturb the things to take a saucer for the cat until the tea was made. As she bent down, Matilde took her handkerchief quietly from her pocket and laid it quite naturally in her lap. Veronica, being on the other side of the table and the urn, could not possibly see what she did.

Gregorio came in. Elettra had opened the door from without, for him to pass. She stood on the threshold a moment, and looked towards the table, to see whether anything had been forgotten. Then she closed the door, and went away, leaving the three together. The water boiled almost immediately; and Gregorio was just sitting down when Matilde poured the water out of the teapot, and put in the tea. She filled the pot, and leaned back in her chair, to allow it to draw a few moments.

The silence was intense during several seconds. Only the purring of the cat was heard, as Veronica, letting her arm hang down without stooping, gently rubbed its broad head. It pushed itself under her hand, bending its back to her caress, turned quickly,

and pushed its head under her hand once more, doing the same thing again and again.

Matilde sat upright, lifted the cover of the tea-pot an instant, and then began to move the cups. Veronica, whose thoughts were intent upon the animal she was touching, and which, as she knew, was begging for cream, immediately leaned forward, and took from under the silver cream jug a saucer which Elettra had especially brought for the purpose. She poured a little cream into it, and, bending down, placed it on the lower shelf of the tea-table, and gently pushed the cat towards it.

Matilde saw her opportunity, while Veronica was stooping; and in that moment she distributed the three lumps from her handkerchief in the three cups before her, and at once began to pour tea into the one containing the largest lump. The cat, for some reason, wished the saucer to be set upon the floor; and Veronica still bent down, until it sprang lightly upon the lower shelf, and began the slow and dainty operation of lapping the cream.

During all this, Gregorio, anxious to seem unaware of anything extraordinary, and not really knowing how his wife meant to put the poison into the tea, was nervously looking away from her, sometimes towards the window, at the fast-fading light of the grey afternoon on the opposite house, and sometimes at Veronica's head as she bent down. When she looked up, Matilde was holding out her

cup to her, having put some cream into it and a lump of real sugar to really sweeten the tea.

Veronica thanked her, drew a little nearer to the table, held her cup on her knee, and took a thin slice of bread and butter, which she proceeded to eat, stirring the tea slowly with her left hand.

Matilde meanwhile filled the other two cups, and handed one to her husband, who took it in silence, unsuspectingly.

"I can never understand why the tea we make here is better than mine," she said, smiling. "It is the same tea, of course. But it certainly is better in your room."

"Is it?" asked Veronica, carelessly and looking down at the cup she held on her knee, while she slowly stirred the contents.

As though to verify Matilde's assertion, she bent a little, raised the cup, and tasted the liquid. It was still too hot to drink, and she stirred it again on her knee. She noticed that although it had been sweet enough to her taste, there was a lump of sugar, not yet dissolved, still in the cup: she never took but one piece, and her aunt had evidently put in two.

Still holding the cup on her knee, where Matilde could not possibly see it, she quietly fished the superfluous piece of sugar out with her teaspoon, and bending down again she deposited it in the saucer from which the cat was lapping the last

drops of cream. She noticed that it was only dissolved at the corners, but she had observed before that one sometimes finds a lump of sugar which remains hard a long time. The cat would eat it, for it liked sugar, as some cats do.

Then she filled the cat's saucer again. By that time what she had was cooler, and she drank some of it.

"It is certainly very good tea," she said thoughtfully. "I think you probably make it better than I do."

As she drank again, Gregorio's unearthly laugh cracked and jarred in the room. But neither he nor his wife had seen what Veronica had done. They were staring hard at each other, and for the second time Matilde felt that her brow was moist.

319

END OF VOL. I.

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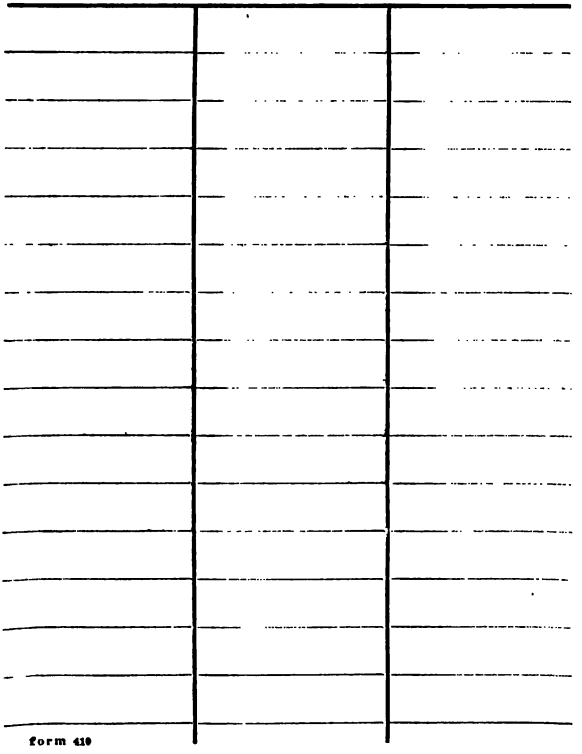

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